

NHS and Social Care Complaints

A report into people's experiences of making formal complaints about NHS treatment or social care.

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Contents

About Healthwatch	3
Executive Summary	4
Full Report	11
Context.....	11
What we did.....	13
The people we heard from	14
What people told us.....	15
Social care complaints	18
NHS complaints.....	19
The complaints process.....	21
Complaints Meetings.....	26
Complaints Responses.....	27
Satisfaction levels and next steps.....	34
The Independent Health Complaints Advocacy Service Perspective	36
Overall Themes.....	37
Key findings	40
Recommendations	41
Response to the report.....	44
Appendix A Demographics of respondents	46

About Healthwatch

Healthwatch Shropshire is your local health and social care champion

If you use GPs and hospitals, dentists, pharmacies, care homes or other support services in your area, we want to hear about your experiences. We are independent and have the power to make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to local feedback and improve standards of care. We can also help you to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice. Last year, the Healthwatch network helped nearly a million people like you to have your say and get the support you need.



We work to make your voice count when it comes to shaping and improving services. We use a variety of methods to find out what people like about services, and what could be improved and we share these views with those with the power to make change happen. Our reports go to:

- the organisations who provide services
- the commissioners who pay for services (e.g. Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Integrated Care Board, Shropshire Council)
- service regulators (e.g. Care Quality Commission, NHS England)
- Healthwatch England, our national body, to let them know how local services are working in Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin.

We are not experts in health and social care and surveys are just one of the methods we use to put a spotlight on services and ask people to share their views with us.

We are very grateful to all those who took the time to fill out our survey and partners who helped to share it. If you have an experience to share about the issues raised in the report please do not hesitate to get in touch. Contact details on back page.

Executive Summary

Complaints about health and social care services must be handled in accordance with The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009.¹ The NHS Complaint Standards, published in December 2022, aimed to set out a single vision for what should happen when a member of the public makes a complaint about NHS services (see p.11). Nationally, there has been a push towards making complaints processes easier with some areas of the country moving towards one complaints procedure across the entire Integrated Care System (ICS). For information about our local ICS, including its membership, visit <https://www.shropshiretelfordandwrekin.ics.nhs.uk/>

In addition to delivering local Healthwatch Services, Healthwatch Shropshire has been providing the Independent Health Complaints Advocacy service (IHCAS) since 2016. This means we often hear directly about people's experiences of making a complaint. Some people have described the process as being confusing and disappointing, sometimes resulting in people deciding not to complain at all.

As the ICS includes Shropshire Council we decided to ask people to share their experiences and views of complaints handling across our health and social care services in the last two years.

Who we heard from

This report is based on the experiences of the **78 people** who gave a full response to our online survey. (People were also given the chance to complete the survey either over the phone or face-to-face with a member of staff).

We asked people where they found information about complaints procedures:

Social Care Complaints

- 42.9% from the Council website
- 28.6% did not find any relevant information

NHS Complaints

- 37% from Patient Advice Liaison Service (PALS)
- 31.5% from Healthwatch Shropshire

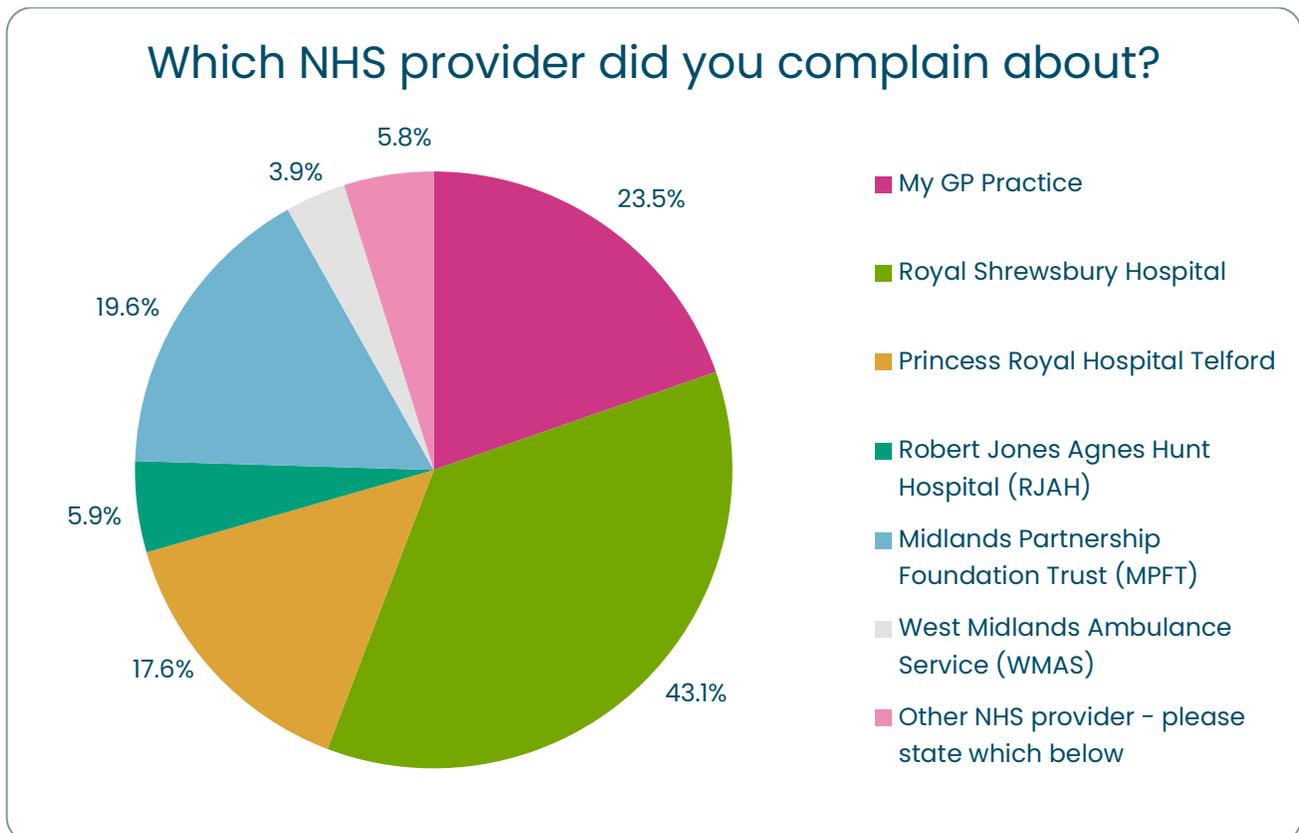
¹ [The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints \(England\) Regulations 2009 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

- 22.3% from an NHS website

Which organisations people complained about

54 people made a complaint about an NHS service and **7 people** had made a complaint about social care. **17 people** considered making a complaint but didn't, and gave various reasons, including feeling like it wouldn't make a difference and thinking it may affect their future care and treatment.

NHS Providers people complained about



'Other NHS' services included:

- Connect Health Pain Management Services
- Shropshire Fertility Services
- Walsall Manor Hospital

How long people waited for a response during the complaints process

Waiting times for the complaint to be acknowledged as being received

- 36 people waited 4 weeks or less, 11 people waited over a month, 7 people did not know, and 4 people never received one.
- Of the 7 people complaining about **social care** one person had to wait longer than a month, five out of seven had their acknowledgement sooner.

Waiting times for a full response to the complaint (e.g. a written response or offered a meeting to discuss their complaint)

- Of the 59 people who answered, 21 had not yet received a response
- 15 people waited 1-3 months and 10 had waited 7-12 months
- Looking just at the 7 **social care** complaints, 3 people had received their response and all were received within 1-3 months of the complaint being made.

Organisation's own deadlines being met

Organisations set their own deadlines within which they will respond to a complaint.

- Of the 38 people who answered, 5 told us they received a response by the deadline they were given
- 15 people told us the deadline was not met
- 12 people were not given a deadline

We asked if people were kept informed of progress; 27 people felt they were kept well informed during the process, 31 people felt they were not.

Complaints Responses

Complaints meetings

- 10 of 38 people who responded to this section were offered a complaints meeting, 21 people were not
- 5 people who were not offered a meeting said they would have liked to attend one

How they felt about the response they received

33 people told us about how they felt when they received a response to their complaint: 3 described positive reactions, 4 described mixed, and 26 people described negative reactions.

18 people told us the response was clear and easy to understand, 15 didn't think it was.

18 people told us all the issues they had raised hadn't been responded to, and 10 people felt it only partially answered the issues.

Preventing the problem happening again

5 out of 37 people said they had been told about steps the organisation had taken to prevent the incident raised from happening again.

30 out of 37 people felt 'not confident at all' or 'not very confident' that measures were in place to avoid the incident happening again.

Satisfaction Levels

Of the **37** people who answered if they were satisfied with the outcome of their complaint

- no-one said they were 'very satisfied';
- 21 people were 'not satisfied at all'
- 6 people were 'not very satisfied'
- 8 people were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'
- 2 people were 'fairly satisfied'

Taking the complaint further

- 17 people did not take their complaint further
- 8 people did take their complaint further
- 8 people didn't know they could have, but would have wanted to.

Sentiments of free text answers to our survey

The WordCloud on the next page illustrates the main sentiments expressed through free text responses throughout our survey.



Key Findings

1. People told us that they **didn't feel that they were taken seriously** or given proper attention, they described feeling ignored, 'fobbed off' or that their complaint was not taken seriously by those investigating it.

"Very upset as nobody even took my complaint seriously [...] Problem is nobody really believes the patient." [GP, PRH, RSH]

2. People commented on the feeling that **organisations were defensive** in their approach to their complaint, mentioning a feeling of being 'lied to' or just apologised to without explanations.

"It was a clear denial. [...] Nothing was addressed or acknowledged as it should have been." [Walsall Manor]

3. People told us about their experiences of using the complaints process and that they felt it was **difficult to navigate or confusing**.

"Complaint process is complex and difficult to navigate, it was time consuming." [MPFT]

4. **Delays** were a key theme which many people told us they were concerned about.

"The hospital did not respond adequately or in a timely manner." [RSH]

5. People told us about their **dissatisfaction with the response** they received to their complaint.

"It did not cover all aspects of my complaint... I wanted to know why this happened to me. The response didn't say. I wanted an apology, which I got."
[RSH]

6. People told us they **did not feel confident that things would change** or services would improve as a result of their complaint.

"I wasn't left feeling any confidence that these issues wouldn't happen again in the future... doesn't make you feel as though ... the treatment of patients will be better next time." [PRH]

Recommendations to providers

These are taken from what the public told us would improve the experience of complaining about health and social care services.

1. **Ensure people feel they are taken seriously and have been heard**

"Yes, take complaints seriously and learn from historical cases." [Shropshire Council]

2. **Respond openly and honestly to complaints in a language that people can easily understand**

"Do not victimise patients who complain." [RSH]

3. **Simplify the complaints procedure.**

"I would like a straightforward and clear pathway produced on how a complaint is dealt with, and the clear identity of those making decisions." [PRH]

4. **Provide a single point of contact**

"YES. Have a clearly designated person or position who must be available to look at a complaint. So many are held up because a suitable person can't be found or identified!" (MPFT)

5. Minimise delays.

“Faster resolution as I am still waiting over 6 months.” [RSH]

6. Improve communication and be responsive to the individual needs of people making a complaint

“Face to face appointments are necessary when you’re complaining as my complaint is a voice for others.” (St. George’s Hospital, Stafford - MPFT)

Recommendations to the Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Integrated Care System (ICS)

1. Add public information to the ICS website² about complaints, people’s rights within the process and what they can expect, ensuring it is clear and easy to understand following the NHS Accessible Information Standard³. Include the necessary contact details of service providers and the local Independent Health Complaints Advocacy services.
2. All organisations in the ICS to commit to working in partnership to meet the expectations laid out in the NHS Complaint Standards and create an ‘effective complaint handling system’ by:

- Promoting a learning culture
- Welcoming complaints in a positive way
- Being thorough and fair
- Giving fair and accountable responses



Infographic from ‘NHS Complaint Standards Summary of expectations’ p.12

² [Home - STWICS](#)

³ [NHS England » Accessible Information Standard](#)

3. Involve people who have used the complaints process to develop an integrated system across the ICS.
4. Publicly report on the complaints received across the ICS, learning and actions taken to prevent similar experiences to build public trust in the effectiveness of the process and value of feedback.

Context



“Complaints offer a valuable source of learning to help improve services for everyone. Good complaint handling builds a direct and positive connection between those who provide services and the people who use them.”
Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO)
NHS Complaint Standards: Summary of Expectations⁴



The publication of the NHS Complaint Standards from the PHSO in December 2022 had the aim of setting out ‘a single vision for staff and NHS users...of what should happen when someone raises a complaint,’ so that, ‘people making complaints about NHS services get a consistent, positive experience each time.’

The PHSO states: ‘The Complaint Standards support organisations to provide a quicker, simpler and more streamlined complaint handling service. They have a strong focus on:

- early resolution by empowered and well-trained people
- all staff, particularly senior staff, regularly reviewing what learning can be taken from complaints
- how all staff, particularly senior staff, should use this learning to improve services.⁵

In England, complaints about health and social care services must be handled in accordance with The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service

⁴ [NHS_Complaint_Standards_Summary_of_expectations_December_2022_Final.pdf\(ombudsman.org.uk\)](#) (p.8)

⁵ [NHS_Complaint_Standards_Summary_of_expectations_December_2022_Final.pdf\(ombudsman.org.uk\)](#) (p.7)

Complaints (England) Regulations 2009.⁶ Nationally NHS complaints procedures are evolving to meet the needs of the new Integrated Care Systems (ICS) in England and in some areas of England there is now one complaints procedure across the entire ICS footprint⁷ with the aim of making it easier for the public to make a complaint in an ever more joined up health and social care sector.

Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin ICS includes the following healthcare providers:

- The Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust
- The Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
- Shropshire Community Health NHS Trust
- Midlands Partnership NHS Foundation Trust
- West Midlands Ambulance Service Foundation Trust
- 51 GP practices across eight Primary Care Networks.

There are also two local authorities within our ICS:

- Shropshire Council
- Telford & Wrekin Council⁸

For information about our local ICS, visit [Home - STWICS](#)

Locally the handling of complaints was highlighted by the Ockenden Report into maternity services at The Shropshire and Telford Hospital Trust (SaTH). The report states: 'Effective local complaints handling is a part of good clinical governance, enshrined in the NHS Constitution. Done well and in a timely manner, a complaint response can provide patients and families with the answers they deserve, allows areas of concern to be identified and can be used to analyse trends to improve services'⁹

Healthwatch Shropshire has been providing the Independent Health Complaints Advocacy Service (IHCAS) for Shropshire residents and people using Shropshire services for the last seven years. Through this work we hear directly about people's experiences of the NHS complaints process from initial contact through to full written responses. People often tell us they are confused about their options or that they are struggling to get a response.

⁶ [The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints \(England\) Regulations 2009 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

⁷ [Patient experience and complaints :: Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICS \(hantsiowhealthandcare.org.uk\)](#)

⁸ [Who is part of our ICS? - STWICS](#)

⁹ [Findings, conclusions and essential actions from the independent review of maternity services at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust - final Ockenden report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) (p.43)

We also hear from people who want to raise complaints about social care in the County and are unsure where to start, or who have been disappointed by an initial response from a social care provider and don't know what options are left to them.



“We know that even with the best will in the world, sometimes things will go wrong. When they do, a key trait of good leadership is the ability to learn from mistakes and make changes.” Caring about complaints, Local Government Ombudsman 2019¹⁰



We wanted to build a picture of people's experiences of making complaints across health and social care in Shropshire over the last two years. What did it feel like for the people who complained, did they feel listened to and were they satisfied at the end of the process?

What we did

We developed a survey to look at people's experiences of the NHS and social care complaints procedure. We wanted to capture the journey through the process and also hear from those who had considered making a complaint but had decided not to so that we could understand their reasons for this.



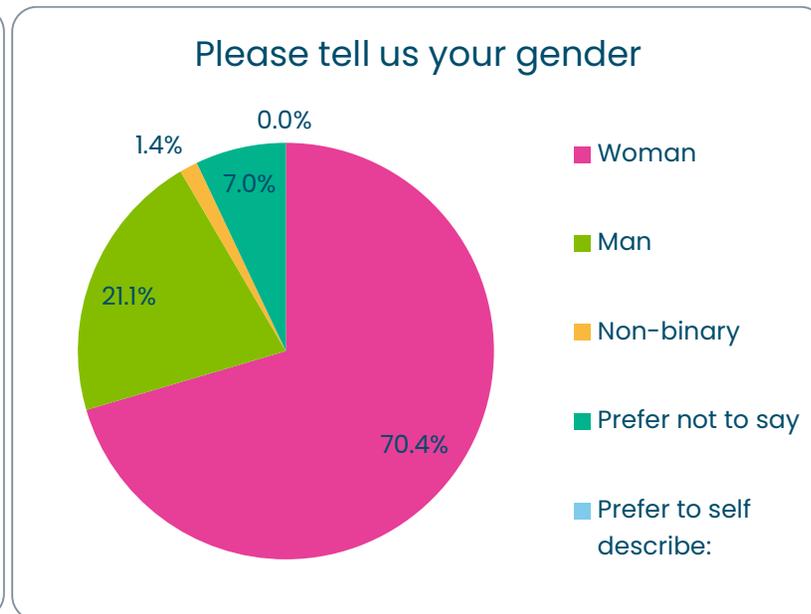
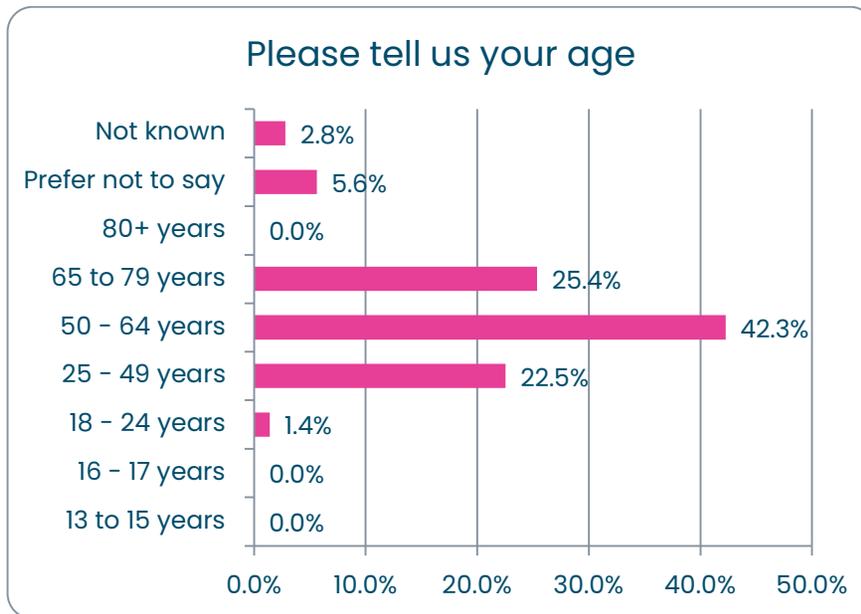
We asked local providers to review our survey and gave them the opportunity to suggest additional questions if there was anything in particular they wanted feedback about.

We promoted our call for experiences across the NHS and social care services and more widely through media, social media and community contacts. We also sent the survey link to anybody who had contacted our IHCA Service in the past two years.

¹⁰ [Caring About Complaints \(lgo.org.uk\)](http://CaringAboutComplaints(lgo.org.uk))

The people we heard from

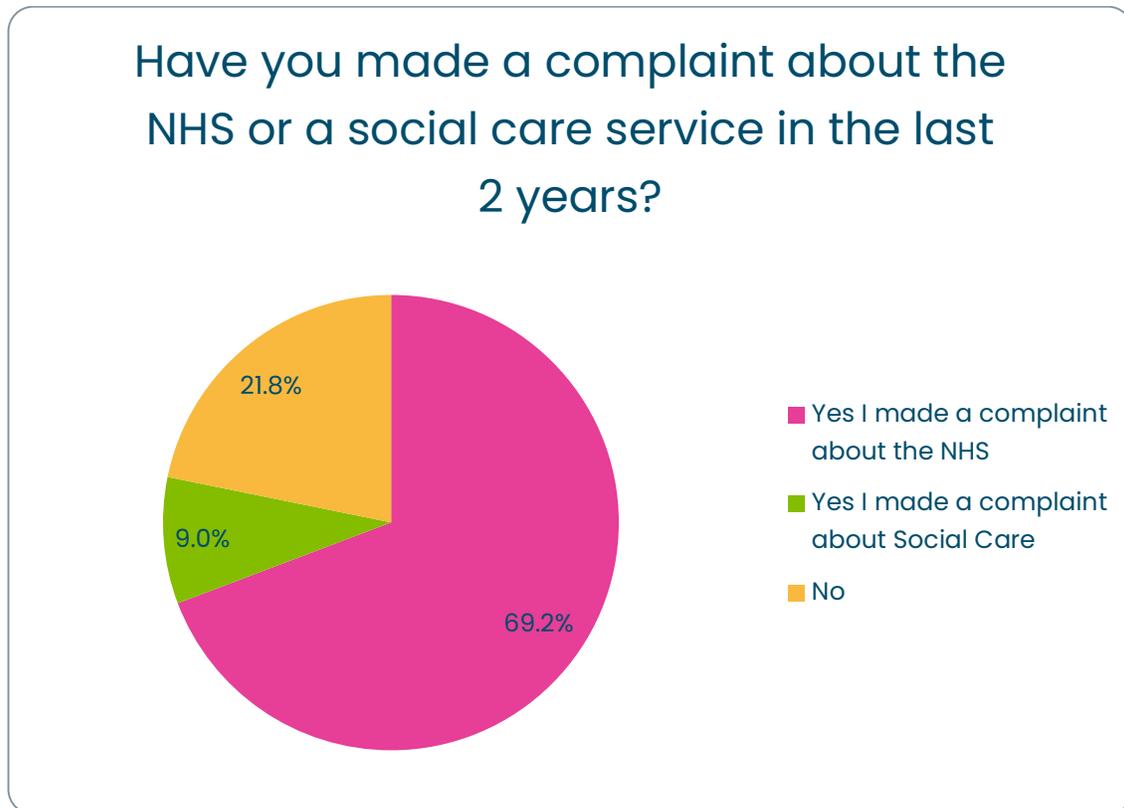
The survey asked if people had made a complaint within the last two years. We had **102** responses, **78** of which provided complete usable data. We could not use the other submissions due to the data being incomplete.



24 people told us they had a disability and **41** had a long-term health condition. Full demographic information is available in the appendix to this report.

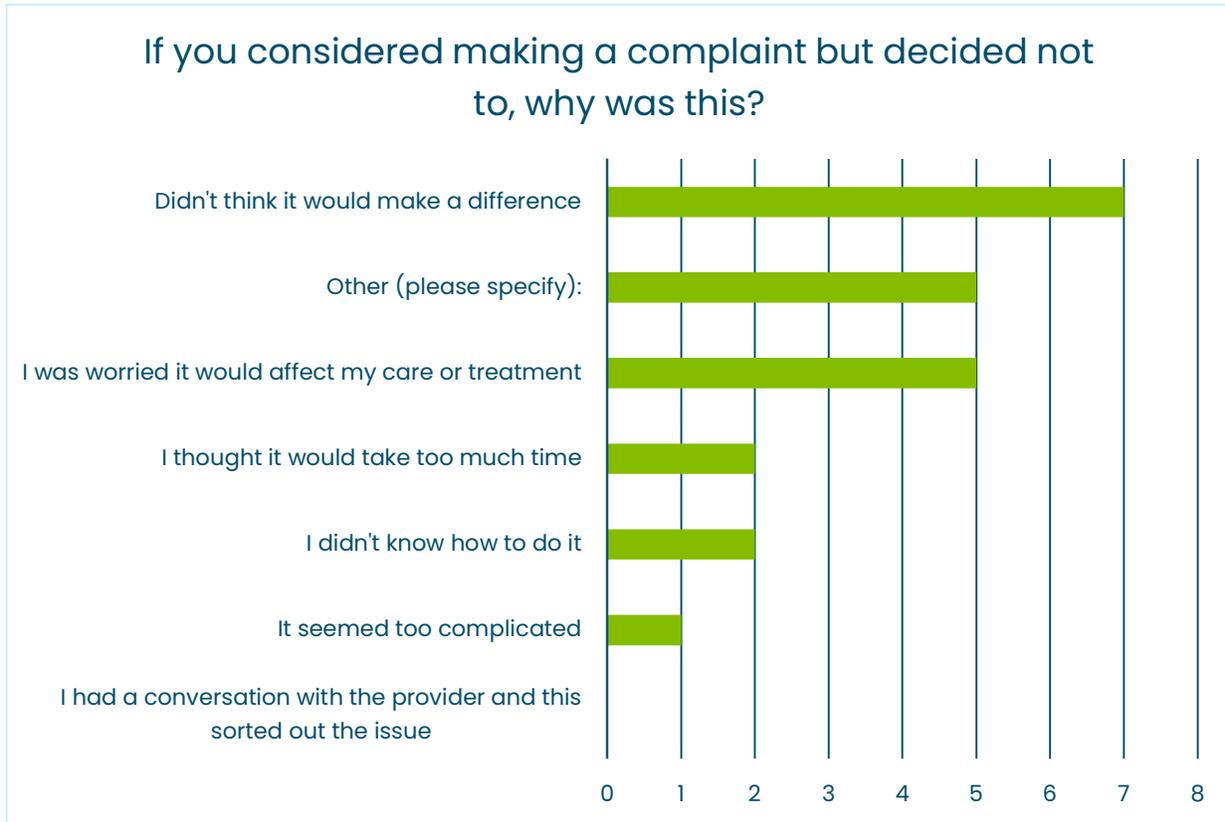
What people told us

54 people (69.2%) had made a complaint about an NHS service, **7** had made a complaint about social care and **17** had not made a complaint.



17 people told us that they had considered making a complaint but had then decided not to:

- **Seven** people gave the reason they did not complain as being because they didn't think it would make a difference.
- **Five** people were worried it would affect their future care and treatment
- **Five** people gave the reason as 'other' – examples on next page.



Examples of 'other' reasons given were:



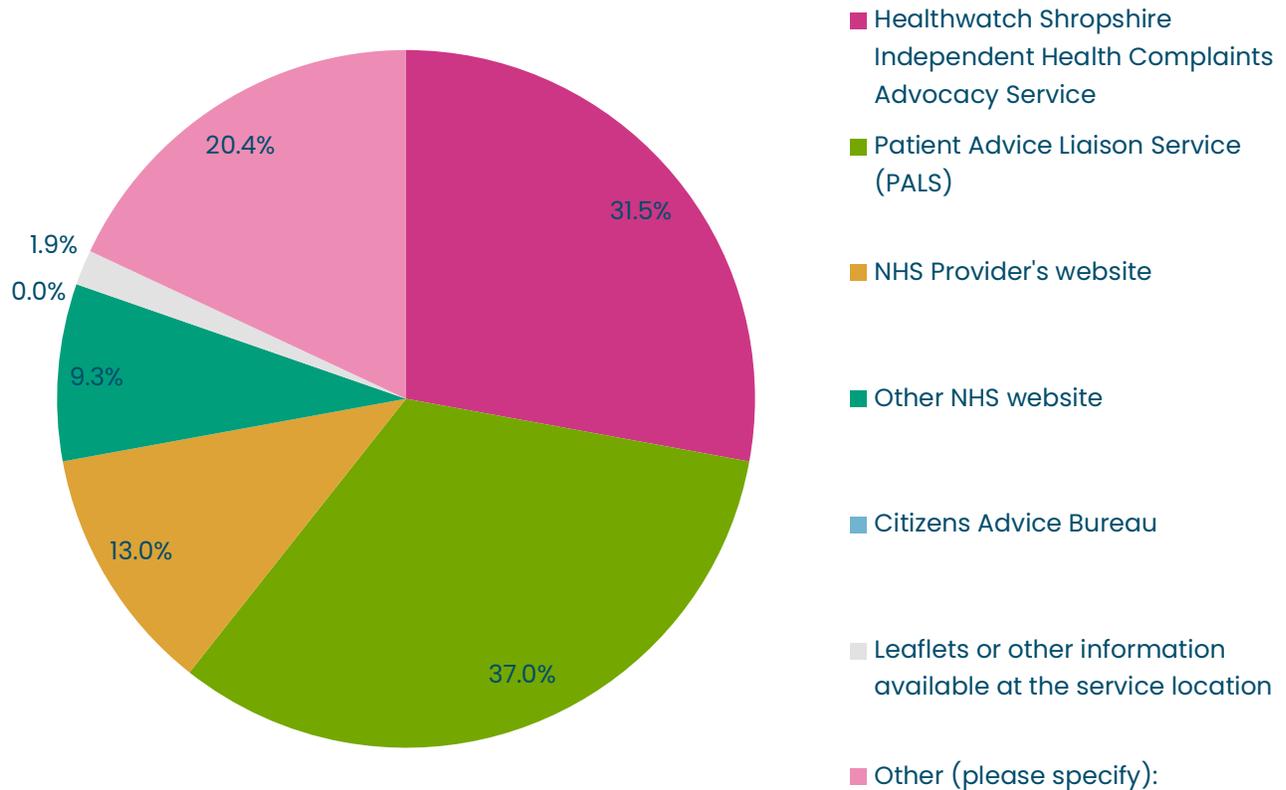
"I was too mentally overwhelmed."

"Complained in the past and was passed from place to place – fobbed off."

"The number I was given to make a complaint was constantly engaged or saying that the system was at maximum capacity, I was unable to get through."



Where did you find information about the NHS complaints process?



'Other' sources of information that people told us about included:

- Information from the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (2)
- Google (1)
- Previous knowledge or previous complaint (4)

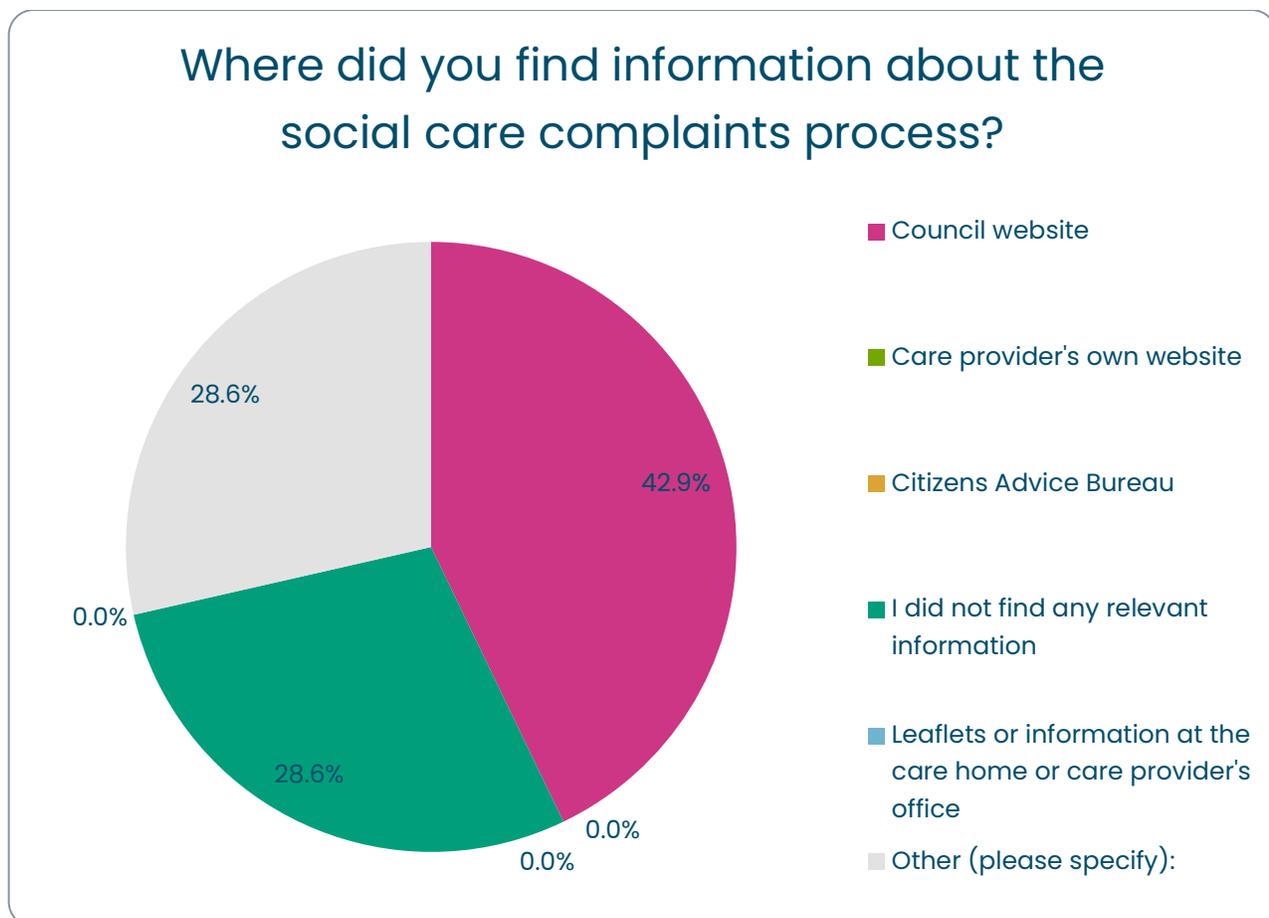
13 people had received information from our own Independent Health Complaints Advocacy Service (IHCAS) and **12** of those said that the information was clear and easy to understand. **One** person said that they understood parts of it.

14 people said they had received information from Patient Advice Liaison Service (PALS); **six** found this information clear and easy to understand, five had understood parts of it and **two** people said it was unclear and confusing.

Of the **seven** people who got information from an NHS provider’s website, **one** said that they found it clear and easy to understand, **three** understood parts of it and **three** felt it was unclear and confusing.

Social care complaints

Seven people told us that they had made a complaint about social care in the last two years. **Six** people told us about complaints about Shropshire Council and **one** told us about a complaint to a domiciliary care provider.



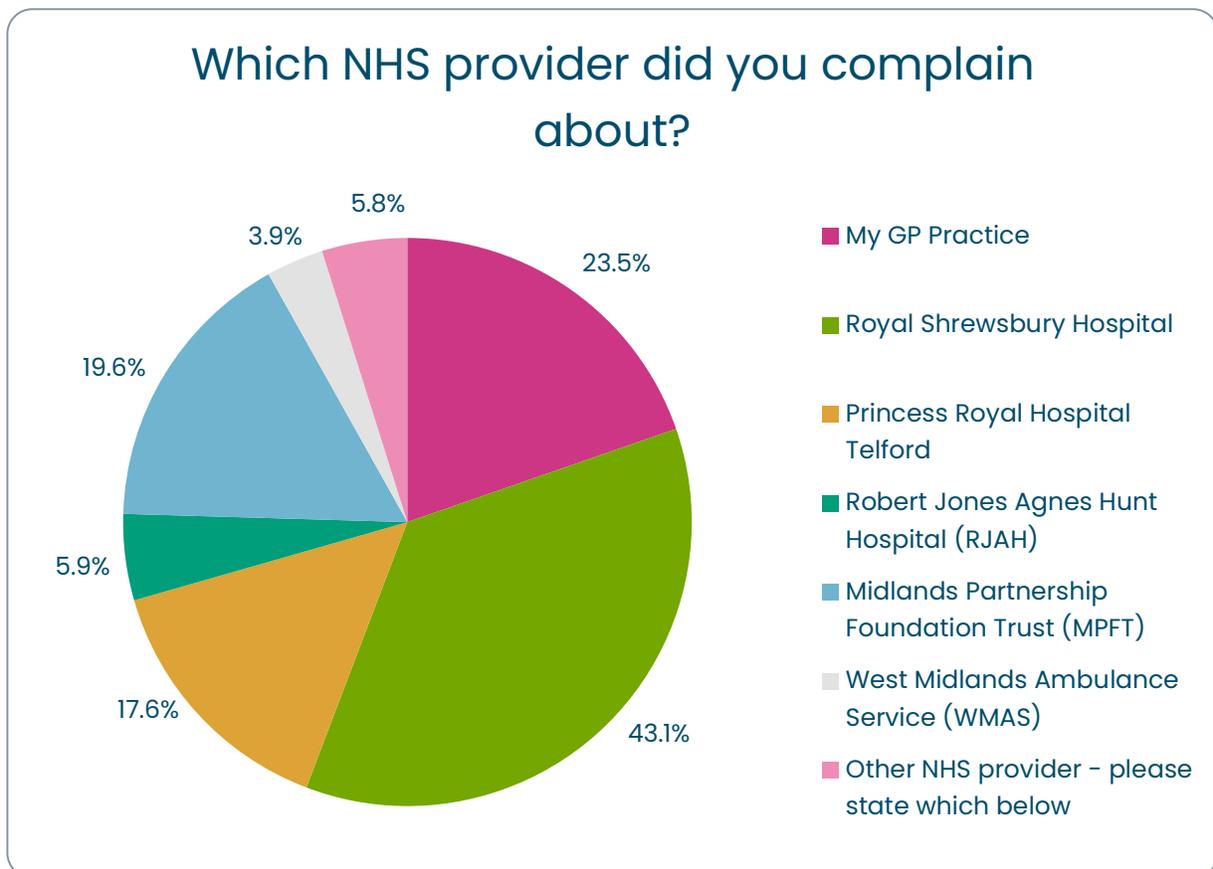
None of the 4 people who had been able to find information about the complaints process answered that they found it clear and easy to understand.

Three people had found information on Shropshire Council’s website; **two** understood parts of it and **one** felt it was unclear and confusing. **One** person got information from

the complaints response letter which they understood parts of and **one** person was already aware of the complaints process from a previous complaint.

NHS complaints

51 people told us which NHS provider they made a complaint about. Some of these people had made a complaint about more than one provider giving a total of **61** responses to this question.



Answer Choice		Response Percent*	Response Total
1	My GP Practice	23.5%	12
2	Royal Shrewsbury Hospital	43.1%	22
3	Princess Royal Hospital Telford	17.6%	9
4	Robert Jones Agnes Hunt Hospital (RJAH)	5.9%	3
5	Midlands Partnership Foundation Trust (MPFT)	19.6%	10
6	West Midlands Ambulance Service (WMAS)	3.9%	2
7	Other NHS provider - please state which below	5.8%	3

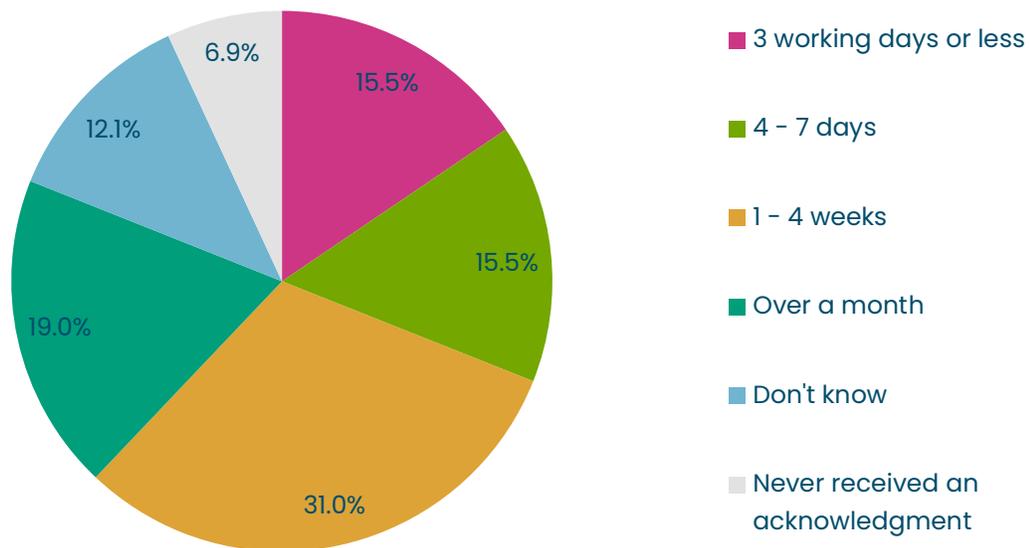
*Percentages shown for each provider are the percentage of people out of 51 who complained about that organisation. Totals do not add up to 100% due to some people having complained about more than one provider.

'Other NHS' services named were:

- Connect Health Pain Management Services
- Shropshire Fertility Services
- Walsall Manor Hospital

The complaints process

Once you made your complaint how long did you have to wait for it to be acknowledged?



62% of people received an acknowledgement of their complaint in four weeks or less. For those complaining about social care only **one** person had to wait longer than a month, **five** out of seven had their acknowledgement sooner.

11 people told us they waited over a month for an acknowledgement of their complaint.

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) NHS Complaint Standards state¹¹:

'We will acknowledge a complaint within three working days of receiving it. This can be done in writing, electronically or verbally.'

Seven people did not know whether they had received an acknowledgement and **four** people said that they had 'never' received one.



27 people told us they felt that they had been kept informed during the investigation into their complaint. **31** people felt they had not been kept informed.

Nine people mentioned emails as being the way they were contacted, **four** people mentioned phone calls.

¹¹ [Model Complaints Handling Procedure \(ombudsman.org.uk\)](http://ombudsman.org.uk)



“Individual dealing with complaint was understanding and helpful and kept me informed by email and once by phone.”

“Initially I had to make contact via the PALS office to get updates as replies were slow. Then I did receive updates at intervals.”



Complaints regulations state:

‘If the responsible body does not send the complainant a response [...] within the relevant period (6 months commencing on the day on which the complaint was received, or such longer period as may be agreed before the expiry of that period by the complainant and the responsible body), the responsible body must—

(a) notify the complainant in writing accordingly and explain the reason why; and

(b) send the complainant in writing a response [...] as soon as reasonably practicable after the relevant period.’¹²

¹² [The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints \(England\) Regulations 2009 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

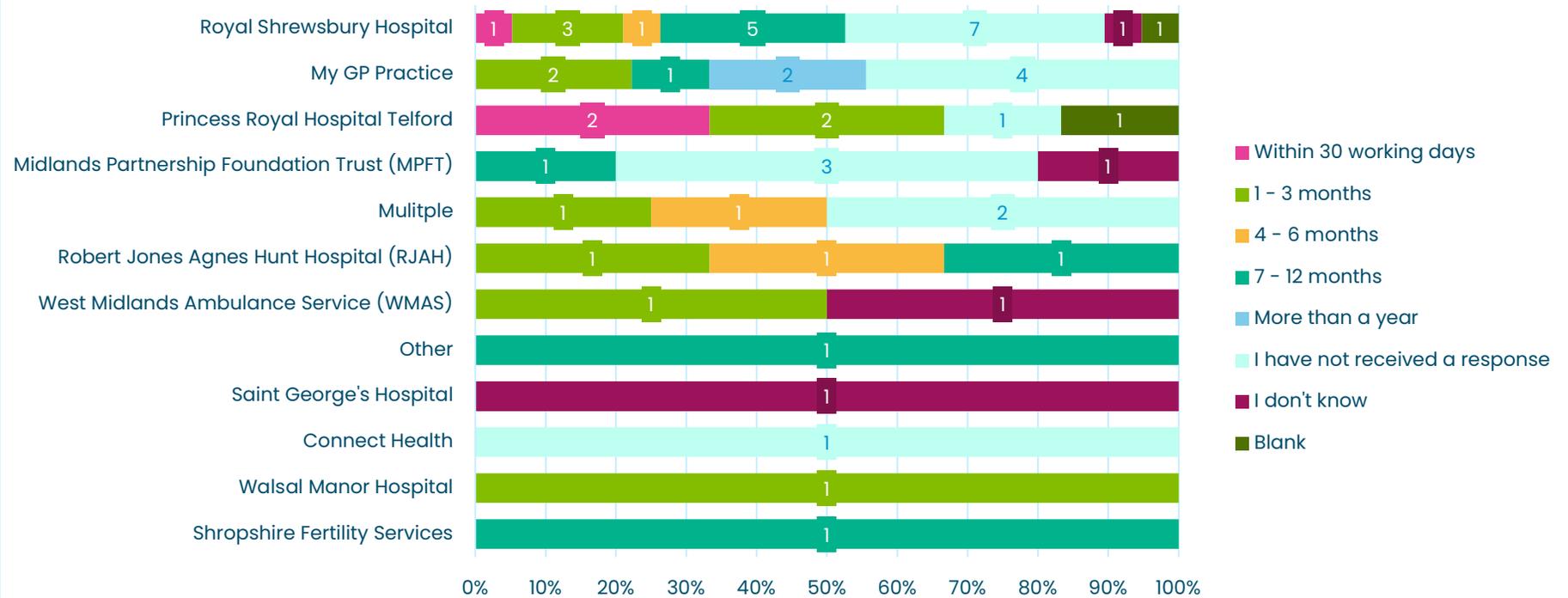


59 people answered this question, **21** of which had not yet had a response to their complaint.

For social care complaints, **three** people had received their response and **all** were received within 1-3 months of the complaint being made.

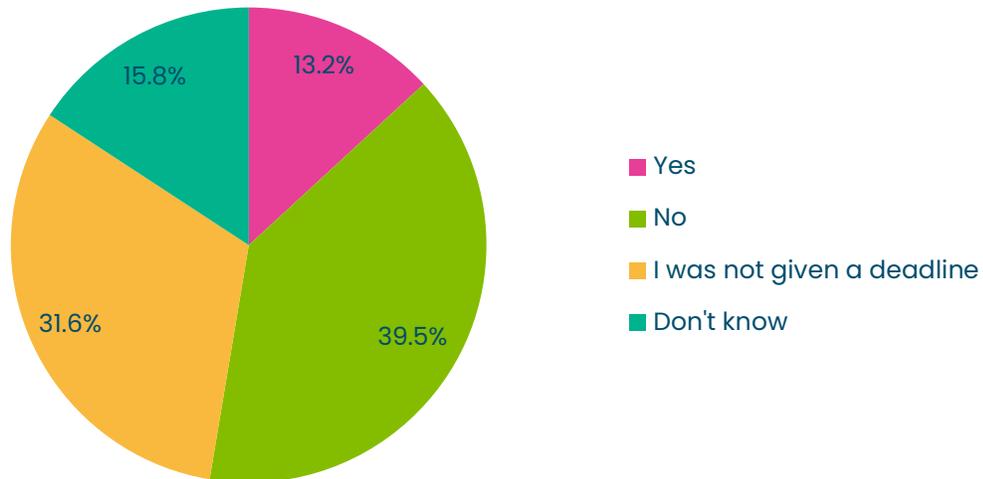
Below these response times are broken down by the organisations which people were complaining about.

How long did it take for you to receive a full response to your complaint?



Waiting times varied across all providers. **Two** people who had complained to their GP practices told us they had not been provided with a written response to a complaint in 'more than a year'.

Did the organisation meet their own deadlines (if you were given a deadline for a response to your complaint)?



38 people answered this question, **five** of whom told us that they received a response by the deadline they were given. **15** people told us that their response was not received by the deadline and **12** people said that they were not given a deadline. **Six** people did not know whether their response was received by a deadline.

Complaints regulations state: 'For the purpose of monitoring the arrangements under these Regulations each responsible body must maintain a record of the following matters—

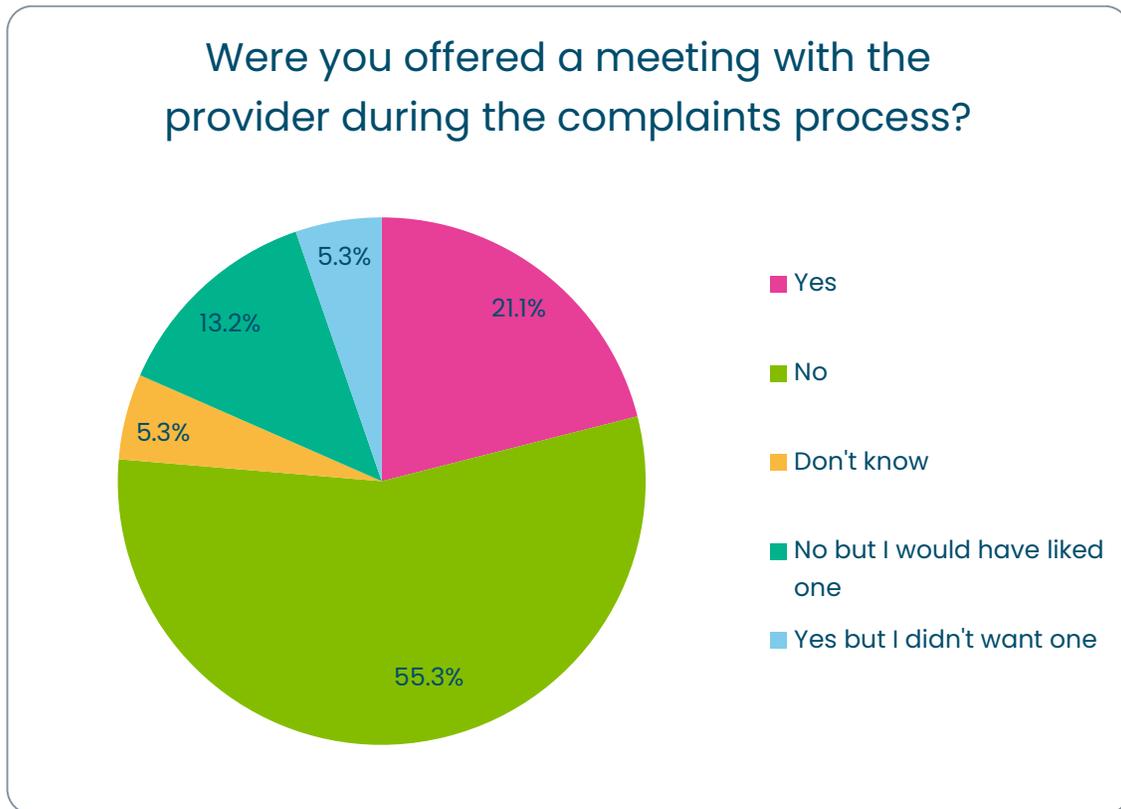
- (a) each complaint received;
- (b) the subject matter and outcome of each complaint; and
- (c) where the responsible body informed the complainant of—
 - (i) the response period specified in regulation 13(7)(b); or
 - (ii) any amendment to that period,

whether a report of the outcome of the investigation was sent to the complainant within that period or any amended period.¹³

¹³ [The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints \(England\) Regulations 2009 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

Complaints Meetings

During the complaints process people can be offered a meeting to discuss the findings of an investigation – this is called a ‘local resolution meeting’. We asked people about their experiences of these meetings.



Of the **38** people who answered this question:

- **10** of them had been offered a meeting during the complaints process; two of these people did not want to attend a meeting.
- **21** people told us that they had not been offered a meeting, a further **five** people said that they would have liked to attend a meeting.

Seven people told us about their experience of attending a meeting. **One** person said the meeting was ‘excellent’. **Two** people mentioned that they were waiting for meetings which hadn’t happened yet:



"I am now awaiting an online meeting with, I understand, senior members of the complaints team."



"I was offered a meeting with a new 'Autism Lead' but it hasn't happened."

Two people expressed negative feelings about the meetings they attended:



"Not good, NHS just lying."



"I had several meetings – appalling and unhelpful."

Complaints Responses

We asked people how they felt when they received the response to their complaint. **33** people responded to this question:

- **Three** described positive reactions to receiving their response
- **Four** described having mixed reactions
- **26** people described negative reactions to receiving their response.

Positive reactions:

Two people told us about their positive reactions to receiving their response:

"Happy to receive a response."

"Pleased it had been taken seriously."

Mixed reactions:

"The method of response – a detailed email – was good, but it missed the point."

"Relieved to get it although not satisfied with response."

"I received an apology which made me feel better. However, I am certainly not confident that any action will be taken or lessons learnt."

"...partly vindicated / understood. However I also believe in part the response was incorrect."

Negative reactions included:

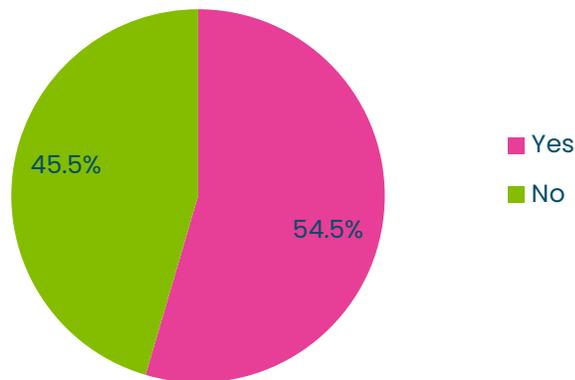
- **Eight** people used the word 'disappointed',
- **Three** people said they felt 'fobbed off' or 'palmed off'
- **Three** people said they felt 'ignored'.

"Deeply disappointed. They basically said that the treatment provided complied with their procedures; they weren't interested in the fact that they weren't meeting my mother's needs and showed what I considered to be a callous disregard for her safety."

"When I received the initial reply to my first letter I felt as though I was being fobbed off. They did not answer the points to my satisfaction and I have sent several letters since then but still do not feel they have fully answered things. They seem to just apologise for mistakes and how they did things in the hope that this will be acceptable but it is not."

"The letter said sorry, but went on to blame me I felt. They certainly didn't show any remorse or take any blame for the actions of staff? I didn't even get a signature on the letter. It was not an apology nor did it deal with the complaint. I have replied to the letter and sought help from the Ombudsman, but failed to get any reply to date!"

Was the response clear and easy to understand?



33 people answered the question 'was the response clear and easy to understand?':

- **18** agreed that it was
- **15** did not find the response clear and easy to understand.

Comments included:



"The letters I received were clear but not very swift in arriving."

"Despite several typing errors throughout, the letter was easy to follow due to the clear paragraphs."

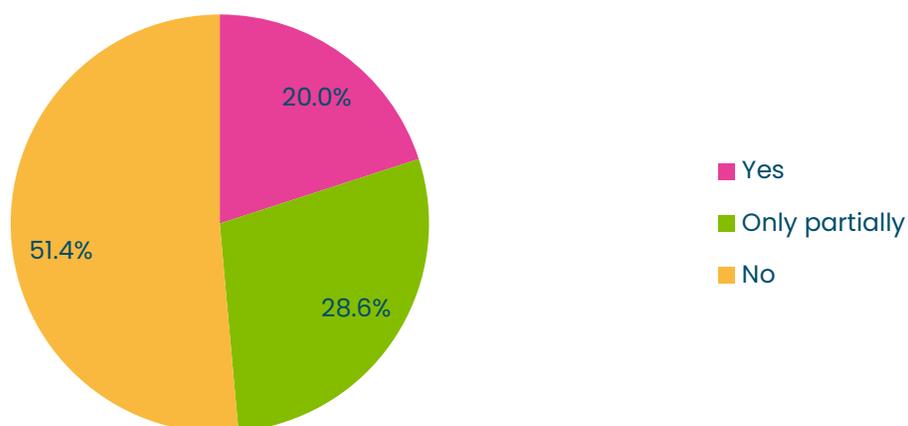
"The letter said that they would "pass this letter" to heads of departments - which makes no sense, because the letter didn't set out the details of my complaint. Unless they mean a different letter, but it didn't say that."

"It was unclear who had actually composed the response."

"The response was several pages and did not address the issues I raised by reference to my letter of complaint. It contained jargon and made reference to internal structures."



Did you feel the response answered all the issues raised in your complaint?



A total of **35** people answered this question with **seven** feeling that the response they received answered all of the issues they raised, **10** people felt the response had only partially answered their issues and **18** telling us they felt the response had not answered all of their issues.

For the seven people who made social care complaints, **one** person felt that the response had only partially answered the issues they raised and **three** others felt that the response did not answer their issues.



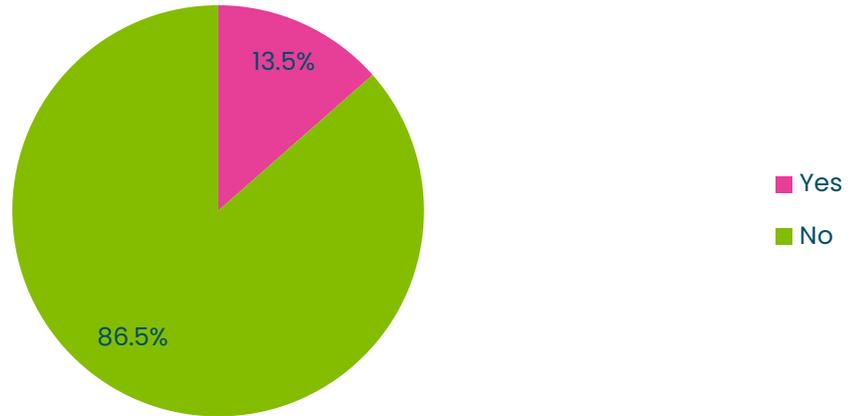
"The procedure of dealing with the complaint was good but the reasoning given by the healthcare provider was weak."

"Almost all of the points I raised were responded to, the issues weren't resolved or justified."

"I received a lot of apologies but do not feel as though they fully answered everything."

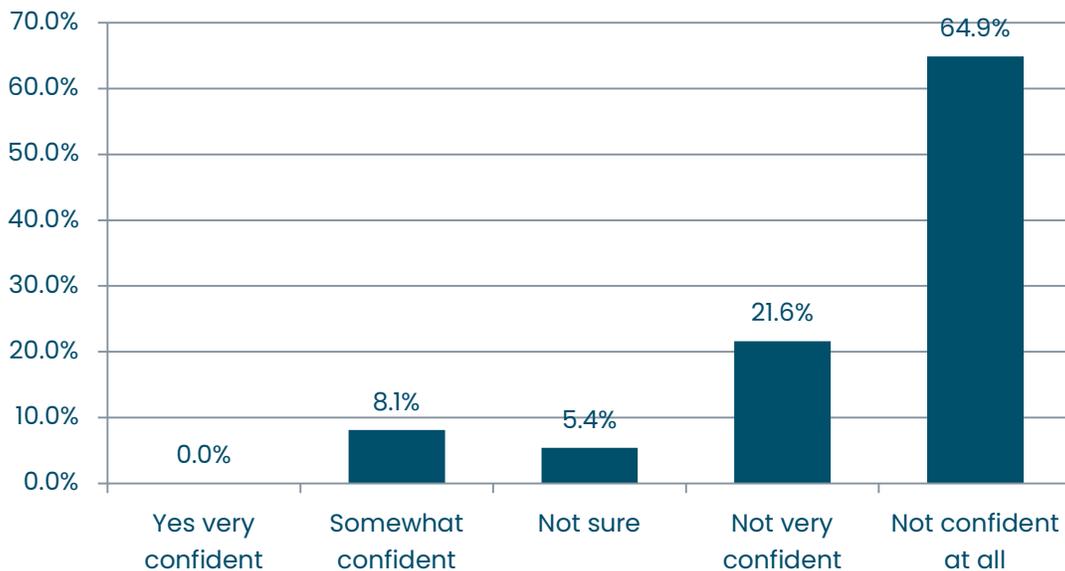


Were you told about steps the organisation had taken to avoid the incident happening again?



37 people answered this question with **five** telling us that they were told about steps that had been taken to prevent the incident raised in their complaint from happening again.

Did you feel confident that measures were now in place to avoid the incident happening again?



We asked the **30** people who were 'not very confident' (8) or 'not confident at all' (24) that measures were now in place to avoid the incident happening again why they felt like this.

Sample responses:



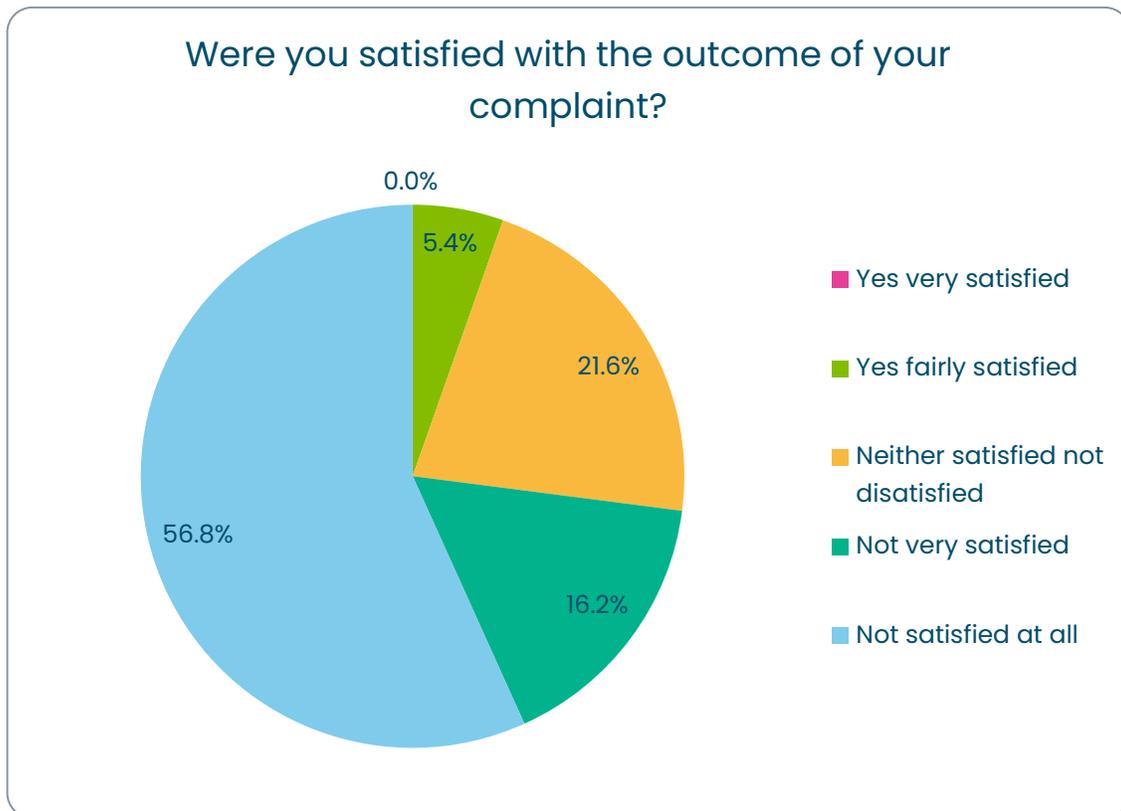
"The response letter had the statement "We will look to learn from these examples and be better in future." There was nothing to say what would be put in place."

"I only have their word that they would carry out the things they suggested and I have little faith in what they say."

"There are a lot of meetings, a lot of people involved and requirements and staff changes mean that anything that may change is not likely to last."



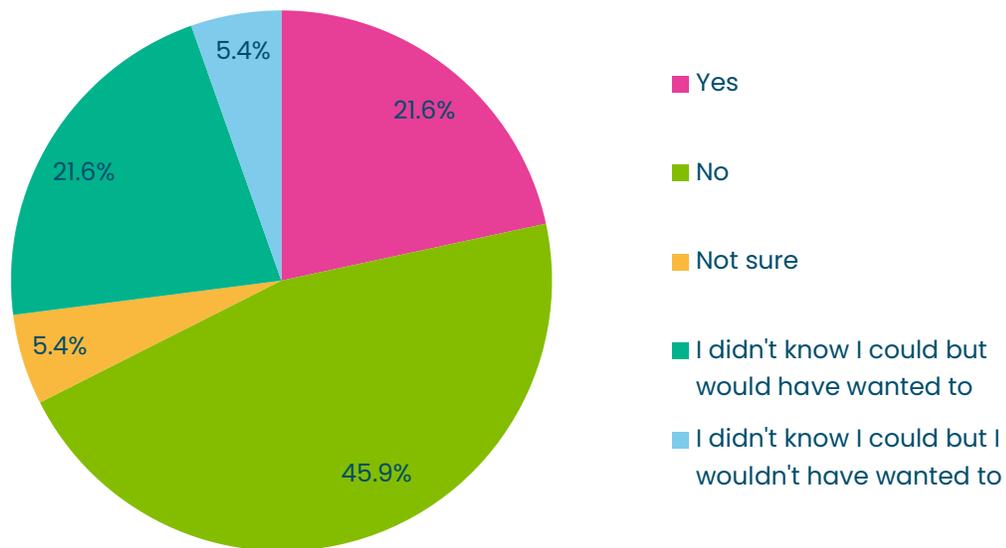
Satisfaction levels and next steps



37 people answered this question:

- **No-one** was 'very satisfied'
- **2** were 'fairly satisfied' with the outcome of their complaint
- **8** people were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'
- **6** people were 'not very satisfied'.
- **21** said they were 'not satisfied at all'.

Did you choose to take the complaint further? For example to the Ombudsman



17 people told us that they did not take their complaint any further than the provider. **Eight** people did take their complaint further following the response from the provider. **Eight** people didn't know that they could take their complaint further but would have wanted to.

Where did they take their complaint to next?

- Four people took their complaint to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) for NHS complaints.
- Three out of the seven people who complained about social care took their complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.
- Two people told us that they raised their concerns with the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

We did not ask people the outcome once they had contact the PHSO as this is outside the local complaints system.

The Independent Health Complaints Advocacy Service Perspective

HWS has delivered the IHCA Service for the last seven years and in that time have spoken to over 800 people about their NHS complaints and worked with nearly 200 clients, supporting them to make a complaint.

Our advocates have found the following main themes across all providers:

Communication – often a complaint is much more about **how** the patient or their family were told something rather than **what** they were told. Where issues with communication are the source of the complaint this is compounded when communication fails during the complaints process, for example by missing deadlines or not keeping people informed of progress. Training for staff on appropriate conversations with patients or service users could be useful; how to provide sympathy and signposting for feedback rather than encourage people to complain.

Psychological distress – complainants can sometimes be suffering from psychological distress following the incident which led to the complaint. This can be through a bereavement or perhaps through trauma following an invasive procedure. Offering **counselling** to complainants in need of it would support them to manage the complaints process and enable them to 'move on' at its conclusion.

Meetings – offering complaints meetings in a **neutral** space would be beneficial to some complainants -particularly those who have been bereaved. There have been times where people have expressed how distressed and anxious they feel at having to return to the place where their loved one died to attend a meeting. On occasion meetings have even been held in a room opposite the Ward where the death occurred.

Demonstrating a difference – complainants often do not believe that changes will be made or have been made following their complaint. Quite often this is due to a loss of faith in the provider but also because it can be so difficult for providers to demonstrate that changes have been made. People often say 'it's just words'.

Smaller organisations such as care providers, dentists and GP practices can often provide a timelier, more streamlined process and response to complaints due to having smaller teams and quicker access to the information necessary to investigate complaints.

Overall themes

There were several free text questions throughout our survey. We have analysed the information which came through these questions and organised the responses into key themes.

The organisations people were complaining about appear in brackets after the sample comments related to each theme.

1. People didn't feel they were taken seriously or given proper attention

People told us they felt ignored, 'fobbed off' or that their complaint was not taken seriously by those investigating it.

"Person investigating complaints sided with the doctors and had the cheek to say I had received good care. My complaints were completely ignored." (Mental health services, Oswestry)

"Shropshire does not have an effective complaints procedure. All I have been offered is excuses and obfuscation." (GP)

"I had previously supplied some photo-copied documents that I believed to be relevant to an investigation of my complaint. I now believe that this information was ignored." (GP)

2. Defensive behaviour by organisations

People commented on the feeling that organisations were defensive in their approach to their complaint, mentioning a feeling of being 'lied to' or just apologised to without explanation.

"PALS and GP practice are just saying they are sorry and everything I said is just I felt so and not their fault. NHS is just lying about what they did and how they treated me ... you have no proof so it hasn't happened. As I was very vulnerable at the point when it happened I didn't expect I'd have to record all what hospital staff told me and how they told it..." (GP, RSH, PRH)

"Excuse after excuse was given with staff defending their actions or giving a poor apology... doesn't make you feel as though the apology is sincere." (PRH)

"The clear unwillingness of the Trust to be open and honest, to admit the failings of its staff and to learn from these failings." (RSH)

"It was clear they do not take their services seriously and blame patients for their actions! ... I felt they want to blame anyone rather than take the complaint seriously." (GP, school clinic)

"After the complaint had been made by my husband a nurse came to the ward and told everyone that we should not complain because they were all so busy. All the patients felt uncomfortable and I was upset." (RSH)

"Structure and content [of response] hard to follow, lots of repetition and some evasion defensiveness." (RSH)

"Tried to make excuses. I could see it was pointless. So gave up." (WMAS)

"Stopped answering me rather than admit the lies, false signatures and resulting disability..." (PRH and BeeU)

3. Complaining is a complicated and confusing process

People told us about their experiences of using the complaints process and that they felt it was difficult to navigate or confusing.

"I never had a person who was my point of contact to tell me what they were doing for me... The whole process felt like a battle just to speak to someone at PALS. It's a flawed system in my experience." (PRH)

"I had a problem with the Shropshire Orthopaedic Outreach Service - both with the original assessment and the referral to Connect Health. It got very confusing (I thought I had emailed SOOS as used email on letter but turned out to be PALS) then got even more confusing with being referred to a private Pain Management service - when I wanted physiotherapy. So I contacted Healthwatch and, via them, contacted the CCG, which became the ICB and lots of time etc. wasted whilst they had MEETINGS... They [PALS] used to be hospital based. All very confusing and complicated." (RJAH)

"It was very difficult to find what or who to complain to..." (GP, school clinic)

4. The organisation was slow to deal with the complaint

Delays were a key theme which many people told us about, this also came up as a key point when we asked for suggestions for improvements.

"I found myself emailing and calling to chase PALS as deadlines they gave me were missed. The case manager never contacted me the day she promised to due to meetings. She told me her colleague had "misunderstood" when they told me I would have a response by a certain date... I constantly felt as though contact was promised just to pacify me although it was often missed." (PRH)

"Yes but some parts had many weeks delay in moving on to the next stage." (MPFT)

5. The organisation's response was incomplete or inadequate

People told us about their dissatisfaction with the response they received to their complaint.

"... most of the points I raised were responded to, the issues weren't resolved or justified... The letter including inaccuracies..." (PRH)

"Missed some of the points" (RJAH)

"Half the "comments "were not dealt with." (GP)

"The response was several pages and did not address the issues I raised by reference to my letter of complaint. It contained jargon and made reference to internal structures. Nor did it actually address some of the points I had raised... it contained inaccuracies and had the senior nurse actually viewed the documents I had commented about in my complaint she would have identified that the claims made by the sister responsible for my mum's discharge were at best incorrect and in my view misleading... In addition the response failed to provide documentation I had requested more than 6 months previously... The complaints process was dealt with in my view as a cynical exercise for PALS and SaTH to pay lip service to the complaints process. The offer to speak with those involved in the complaint was offered. When I contacted the consultant's secretary to arrange a meeting to discuss my mum's case I was ignored. No meeting was arranged." (RSH)

"The letters I received were clear but not very swift in arriving. They seem as though they wanted to avoid giving full answers to my points and instead offered numerous apologies for different things and the impression I had, and still have, is that they seem to think this is enough to satisfy me... As a result of this I have referred my

complaint to the relevant Ombudsman who have agreed to look at it... Some questions that I had asked could not even be answered because they had lost patient records for which, once again, they just apologised!" (RSH)

"Our questions were not answered properly." (Shropshire Council)

6. Belief that the organisation won't learn / improve services

People told us that they did not believe, or did not feel confident, that things would change.

"Not convinced much will change." (RSH)

"What I required did occur. But if it happened again, I was just told they were looking into it. Not what had/will change." (RJAH)

"However, I do not feel that any changes are likely to be made." (RSH)

Key findings

1. People told us that they **didn't feel that they were taken seriously** or given proper attention, they described feeling ignored, 'fobbed off' or that their complaint was not taken seriously by those investigating it.
2. People commented on the feeling that **organisations were defensive** in their approach to their complaint, mentioning a feeling of being 'lied to' or just apologised to without explanations.
3. People told us about their experiences of using the complaints process and that they felt it was **difficult to navigate or confusing**.
4. **Delays** were a key theme which many people told us they were concerned about.
5. People told us about their **dissatisfaction with the response** they received to their complaint.
6. People told us they **did not feel confident that things would change** or services would improve as a result of their complaint

Recommendations

For providers

We asked people if they had any suggestions for how the complaints process could be improved. There were five main themes in the responses.

1. Ensure people feel they are taken seriously and have been heard

“PALS to actually engage in a worthwhile manner with those making a complaint.” (RSH)

“Yes by actually listening to the complaints that were made properly and not telling lies.” (Shropshire Council)

“Yes, take complaints seriously!!!” (Mental health services, Oswestry)

“Yes listen to people’s points. Yes they may not be a medical professional. But they are not fools.” (WMAS)

“Answer their patients.” (GP)

2. Respond openly and honestly to complaints in a language that people can easily understand

“Honesty springs to mind. If doubt exists with-in the honesty of communication, you should re-evaluate the progress at that point of doubt and revert to clarity by addressing the understanding of all concerned at that point.” (GP)

“Yes, Straight answers to the questions / comments.” (GP)

“Do not victimise patients who complain.” (RSH)

“Don't cover up for colleagues to save being sued.” (PRH)

3. Simplify complaints procedures

"Make it simpler." (Walsall Manor)

"Far too complicated, and long winded. Too many complaints procedures (PALS, CCG/ICB, Healthwatch) ... Needs to be ONE Pals for each hospital as before. I was phoning Telford for RJAH." (RJAH)

"There needs to be a simple way to make small complaints (cold tea in hospital) or large complaints (very poor treatment) PALS used to be for each hospital, now it seems generic. And ICB is not known..." (ICB)

"I would like a straightforward and clear pathway produced on how a complaint is dealt with, and the clear identity of those making decisions." (PRH)

4. Provide a single point of contact

"A named person to speak to. A direct number or email address to contact." (PRH)

"And one person dealing with the complainant." (RJAH)

"Talked to a lot of different people during the process. Much easier to deal with the same people so you don't have to repeat yourself." (RJAH)

"YES. Have a clearly designated person or position who must be available to look at a complaint. So many are held up because a suitable person can't be found or identified!" (MPFT)

5. Minimise delays

"I would suggest that if they are unable to stick to time schedules set that people should be kept up to date and also explain the reason behind the delay." (RSH)

"Faster resolution as I am still waiting over 6 months." (RSH)

"Answers to simple complaints should not take 5 months to get." (RSH)

"To work to deadlines and update a complainant." (RSH)

"The length of time between me writing and their replies did take a number of months for each one so they could try and improve their response time." (RSH)

"We were informed a response would be provided by 13th January 2023 yet we are still waiting. Complaint was lodged in July 2022. Process is multi layered and has to

pass through many layers of different departments and we cannot challenge this.” (MPFT)

“Action complaints much sooner and keep patients informed.” (RSH)

“I know there is long waiting period for the letter of reply from the NHS after a complaint and I can't understand why 45 days?” (GP, PRH)

6. Improve communication and be responsive to the individual needs of people making a complaint

“Communication / two-way involvement.” (Council)

“Actually speaking to the person making the complaint would be a good start.” (Fertility services)

“Giving patients access to be able to put forward genuine complaints against GP surgeries.” (GP, school clinic)

“Face to face appointments are necessary when you're complaining as my complaint is a voice for others.” (St. George's Hospital, Stafford - MPFT)

“ Could be improved by the departments concerned being more open about email details.” (MPFT)

Recommendations

for the Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Integrated Care System

- 1. Add public information to the ICS website¹⁴ about complaints, people's rights within the process and what they can expect, ensuring it is clear and easy to understand following the NHS Accessible Information Standard¹⁵. Include the necessary contact details of service providers and the local Independent Health Complaints Advocacy services.**

¹⁴ [Home - STWICS](#)

¹⁵ [NHS England » Accessible Information Standard](#)

2. All organisations in the ICS to commit to working in partnership to meet the expectations laid out in the NHS Complaint Standards and create an 'effective complaint handling system' by:

- **Promoting a learning culture**
- **Welcoming complaints in a positive way**
- **Being thorough and fair**
- **Giving fair and accountable responses**



Infographic from 'NHS Complaint Standards Summary of expectations' p.12

3. Involve people who have used the complaints process to develop an integrated system across the ICS.

4. Publicly report on the complaints received across the ICS, learning and actions taken to prevent similar experiences to build public trust in the effectiveness of the process and value of feedback.

Response

To date, we have received the following responses to this report and recommendations. Further responses will be added as they are received and the updated report will be available on our website.

- **NHS Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Deputy – Director of Nursing and Quality:**

“On behalf of the Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Integrated Care System (ICS), we are grateful to those patients who took the time to share their experiences and to Healthwatch Shropshire for producing and publishing this report.

The work of Healthwatch organisations enhances our understanding of people’s experience and enables an opportunity for improvement. We are sorry to hear that the experience of complaining is difficult for those who access our services, and who contributed to this report. We will be discussing these findings in depth with health and social care professionals across the system, and those that experience our care, so that we can work together to make the necessary improvements.”

- **Shrewsbury and Telford Hospitals NHS Trust – Director of Nursing**

“We take any complaint very seriously within the Trust, as it is important that we listen to our patients and carers and continually learn and improve our services. As part of our improvement work, we ensure that we are compliant with the PHSO standards, as this is best practice. We are committed to improving our responsiveness in terms of time frames and the content of our responses, it is fundamental that we keep our patients at the centre of what we do. To ensure we achieve this, we regularly meet with representatives from our Patient and Carer Experience panel to gain their views and we have started an Independent Review panel process for our complaints, this is led by one of our Patient Representatives.

As a Trust we are engaging with our Integrated Care System to explore how we can achieve a more joined up approach, working together to improve our local communities’ experiences to ensure we have a seamless and standardised approach.”

- **Midlands Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust – Communication Manager:**

“Our patient and service users’ experience is of great importance to us, including using our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) and complaints services’. We are therefore grateful to Healthwatch Shropshire for providing oversight of this report.

All complaints are treated seriously and in complete confidence. Making a complaint will never negatively affect current or future treatment provided to a service user.

We are currently reviewing our processes to make sure they are in line with the NHS Complaint Standards, which will support us to achieve quicker response times and resolution for individuals.

We are committed to working in partnership with the ICS and welcome the report’s recommendations for further learning and sharing amongst providers.”

- **Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital – Chief Nurse:**

“We are grateful to those patients who took the time to share their experiences and to Healthwatch Shropshire for producing and publishing this report. It will help all providers in Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin – including ourselves – to make improvements.

We note a concern in the report that our complaints process is not explained clearly on our website. We will review all external facing information and share proposed

amendments with our Patient Engagement Group, to ensure the process is set out clearly for patients.”

- **West Midlands Ambulance Service, Executive Director of Nursing:**

“At West Midlands Ambulance Service, we work hard to provide an excellent service for patients and where we fall short of this, we welcome the feedback from patients and service users.

We take all complaints seriously and we have a robust system of reporting the learning when things don’t go as we would expect.

We are currently undertaking a self-assessment against the NHS Complaint Standards and will focus improvement work in any areas where we are found to be lacking.

We appreciate the support of Healthwatch in undertaking this work and we are committed to making improvements in the services we provide.”

- **Primary Care:**

Healthwatch Shropshire have been informed that this report will be discussed at the Local Medical Council for Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin and a formal response will follow.

- **Shropshire County Council, Executive Director of People**

“We welcome and thank individuals taking the time to give feedback and thank Healthwatch for bringing this to the councils attention. We do have a dedicated complaints team and a process for people to make a complaint.

We note that of the complaints in the survey, 7 related to social care provided by council and it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from such a small sample. However, we work hard to ensure that where people have cause to complain or provide feedback, the process is as clear and easy to use.

Complaints can be made to any member of staff, by telephone, email, letter and using an online form available via Shropshire Council’s website. Once someone has made a complaint, they are contacted by a complaints officer, providing a point of contact and support through the complaints process. The complaint officer liaises with the relevant

Service Manager(s)/complaint investigators, with the specialist knowledge necessary to investigate and respond to the complaint.

Joint working is in place across health and social care through the Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Protocol for the Handling of Multi-Agency Formal Organisational Complaints to ensure that complaints teams across the health and social care system can jointly manage complaints.

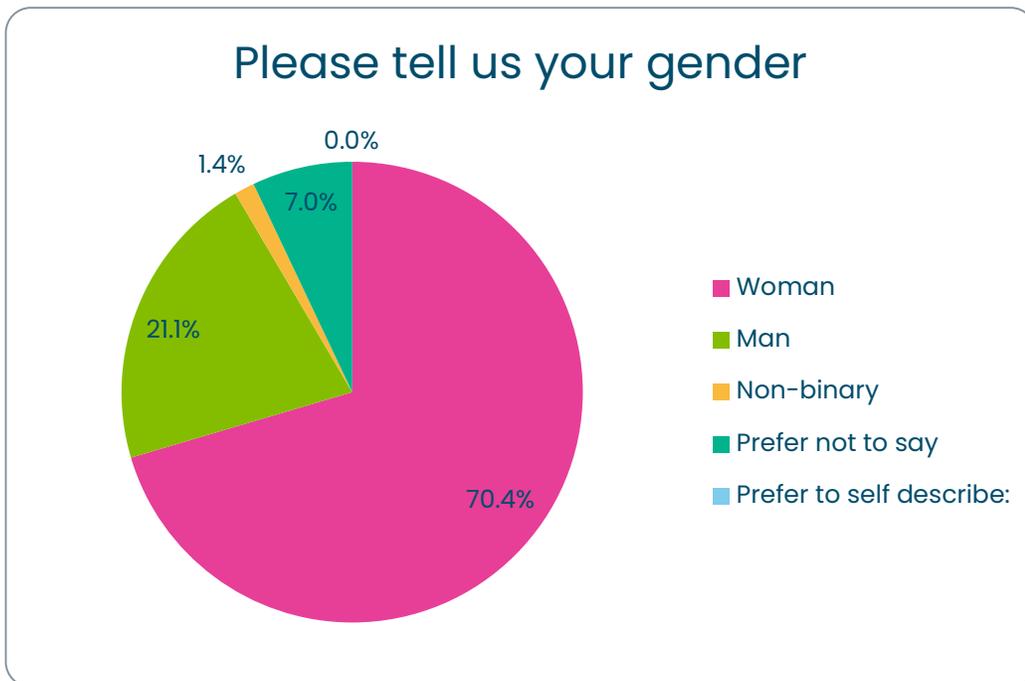
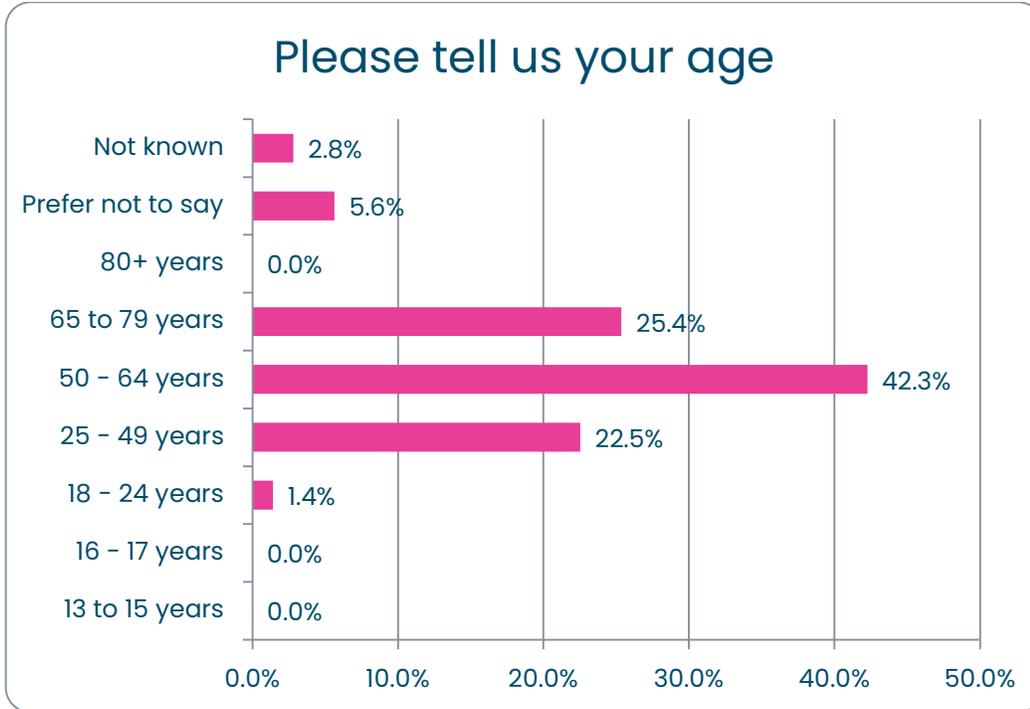
The arrangements remain operational and they will benefit from updating to reflect the changes as a result of the introduction of the Integrated Care Board and System.

It is however recognised that it can sometimes be difficult for the public to know which agency is the most appropriate to respond to a given complaint. The protocol ensures that whichever organisation receives the complaint, joint working takes place to respond.

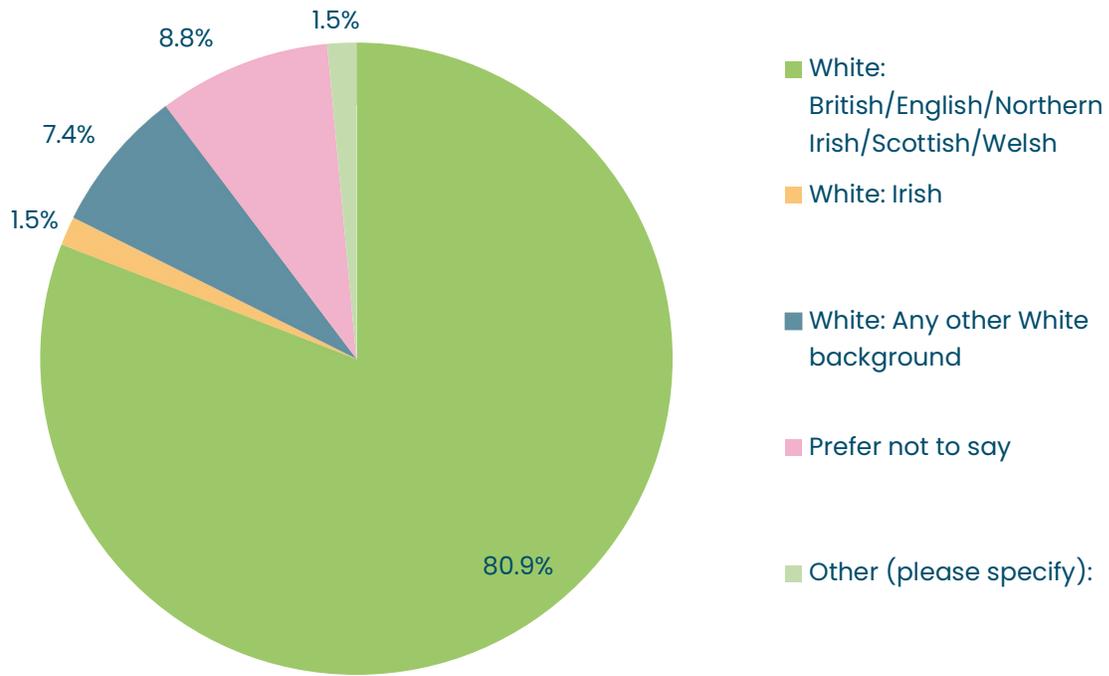
We encourage anyone who has any feedback to use the processes already in place to let us know so we can continue to learn from people's experiences when using our services."

Appendix A

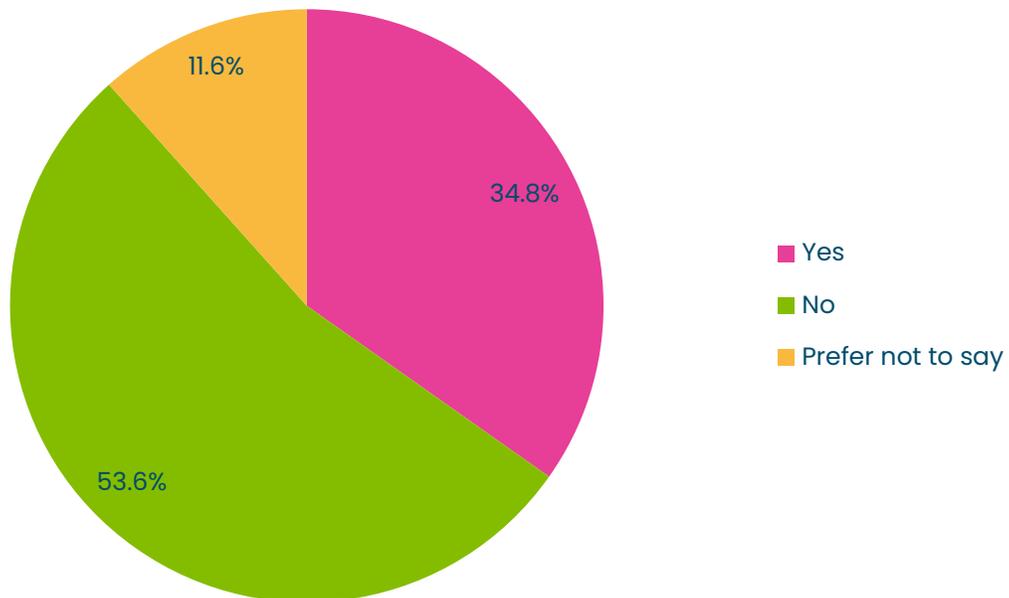
Demographics of respondents



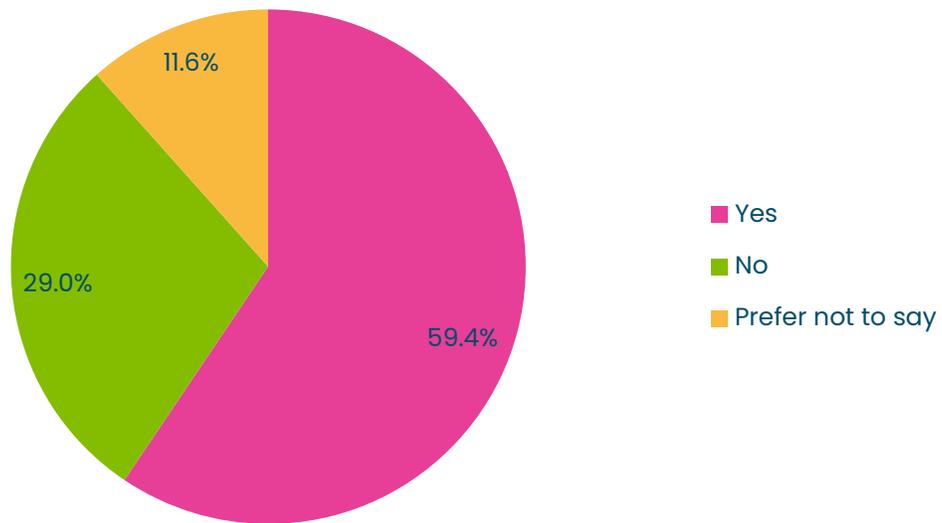
Please select your ethnicity



Do you have a disability?



Do you have a long term health condition?



If you would like to see a copy of the full survey used in this research please contact Healthwatch Shropshire (see back page for contact details.)



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