



Report of Corporate Management Team

Paul Darby, Corporate Director of Resources (Interim)

**Councillor Susan McDonnell, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Digital
and Customer Services**

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To present to Members the Customer Feedback Report for quarter four, 2020/21 (full report attached at Appendix 2).

The impact of COVID-19

- 2 2020/21 has been dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the world more than 115 million people have been infected and more than 2.5 million have died.
- 3 Following confirmation of its first cases in January 2020, the UK government subsequently put in place restrictions to contain the virus, minimise deaths and prevent health and social care systems being overwhelmed. Those restrictions, in varying forms, have impacted our everyday lives, our health and the economy ever since.
- 4 At the beginning of quarter four, in response to a huge increase in COVID-19 cases and the discovery of a faster spreading variant, restrictions were tightened with a third national lockdown. At the same time, the national vaccination programme¹ continued to be rolled out.
- 5 The subsequent fall in infection rates allowed the government to implement plans for a [gradual and phased route out of lockdown](#). The

¹ started on 8 December 2020

first step, centred around children and students returning to face-to-face teaching, was enacted in March.

- 6 In line with these developments, alongside our continuing public health role and work with other agencies on the local resilience forum (covering both County Durham and Darlington) to protect our communities and support those affected by the pandemic, we are also developing plans for future recovery.
- 7 The COVID-19 surveillance dashboard can be accessed [here](#).

Executive Summary

- 8 This report brings together a wide range of information collected from our customers which describes their experiences of using our services.
- 9 It includes an overview of contact through our Customer Services team; a summary of customer satisfaction through surveys and compliments; a selection of customer suggestions and their outcomes; an overview of comments relating to our policies, procedures and decision-making and our performance in dealing with complaints (both statutory and corporate). The report also highlights recent developments that enhance the customer experience.
- 10 We use this information to further develop our services, inform policy decisions and our transformation programme, and support the use of digital tools, techniques and processes to improve the customer experience.
- 11 We are continuing to improve the consistency and quality of the data in this report, as well as increase the range of customer feedback. As much of the information contained within this report is extracted from our Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, and in most cases relates to our Customer Services Team, we are working with teams across the authority to expand the report to better reflect the entire council.
- 12 Unless otherwise stated, all information relates to the 12 months ending 31 March 2021, compared to the same period last year.

Recommendation

- 13 Members are recommended to note the information in the report.

Background

- 14 Successful organisations understand their customers and one way to gain this valuable insight is by gathering and utilising customer feedback. This information, provided by customers as to whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with our services and about their general experience, is a resource for improving customer experience and determining our actions in line with our customers' needs.
- 15 Attached to this report at Appendix 2 is the Customer Feedback Report for quarter four, 2020/21.

Background papers

- None

Other useful documents

- Previous Customer Feedback reports presented to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable.

Finance

Information on financial remedies in relation to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman is included within the report

Consultation

None

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Complaints regarding any equality and diversity aspect are handled in consultation with the Council's Equality Team.

Climate Change

None

Human Rights

None

Crime and Disorder

None

Staffing

None

Accommodation

None

Risk

None

Procurement

None

Customer Feedback Report

Quarter Four,
2020/21

AN EXCELLENT COUNCIL: Are our resources being managed for the best possible outcomes for residents & customers?

Summary^{2,3}

Digital Channels

24% of contact, up 9%

	do it online	web chat**	e-mail	social media
contacts	280,526	5,127	58,235	6,502
% of total	19%	0.5%	4%	0.5%
+/- to last year	+102,864	n/a	+9,362	+3,336

Non-digital Channels

76% of contact, down 9%

Calls answered		
19/20	20/21	change
94%	96%	+2pp

	telephone	face-to-face ³
contacts	1,113,926	0
% of total	76%	0%
+/- to last year	-109,218	-116,711

Digital Skills Survey*

94% use the internet at home

90% said the pandemic has not prevented them using our services

37% would use digital facilities within council buildings to go online. Of these...

43% visiting building anyway

10% have poor internet connection at home

7% have no data left on phone / want to save data

5% have no online facilities at home

respondents felt they would benefit from extra help in relation to ...

data security
9%

printing
7%

scanning
5%

uploading / attaching documents
6%

³ face-to-face data is not comparable as Customer Access Points (CAPs) have been closed since March 2020

* 7 December 2020 to 29 January 2021 – 647 respondents

** October 2020 to March 2021

Customer Contact and Service Development

- 1 The arrival of COVID-19 in the UK in March 2020 led to major changes in our service delivery. Within a very tight timeframe, we fundamentally changed our ways of working, made plans to maintain essential services without compromising the safety of our workforce or residents⁴, and set up new delivery models to meet the additional needs of residents shielding or self-isolating.
- 2 We were able to develop digital alternatives to face-to-face contact⁵ for some services impacted by the closure of council buildings, which allowed those services to continue. However, some services were required to close due to government restrictions, for example leisure centres, cafes, and theatres. Whilst we successfully redeployed some workers from these services to support our response to the pandemic, a small number (equating to 2.7% of our total workforce, excluding school staff) were furloughed.
- 3 However, as the bulk of affected sites have now reopened under the government's roadmap to recovery, most furloughed employees now returned to work.
- 4 Despite the pandemic, we continued to drive service improvements across customer services by standardising, harmonising, and unitising our first point of contact (our integrated customer services initiative).
- 5 Our improved digital offer means almost 200,000 residents now have an online account, and since its launch in June 2020, customers have used webchat more than 5,000 times to access service support and advice across more than 20 web pages.
- 6 As agents can support two concurrent chats and chat times are lower than alternative channels, the conversion of telephony contact to web chat is driving significant capacity creation which will support reallocation of resource to other priority services. 95% of customers are satisfied with this contact method.
- 7 To help us understand the impact of COVID-19 on our residents' ability to access services, we carried out a survey about digital skills between 7 December 2020 and 29 January. The survey showed most respondents⁶ to be

⁴ Included introducing short term contracts for ex-employees or students, sourcing additional staff to support frontline care services, and maintaining a pool of casual staff.

⁵ e.g. live streaming council meetings on [YouTube](#), online consultation events, virtual appointments, option to upload and return documents online

⁶ Of the 647 respondents – 455 were online (71%), 131 were by telephone (20%) and 61 were via paper (9%)

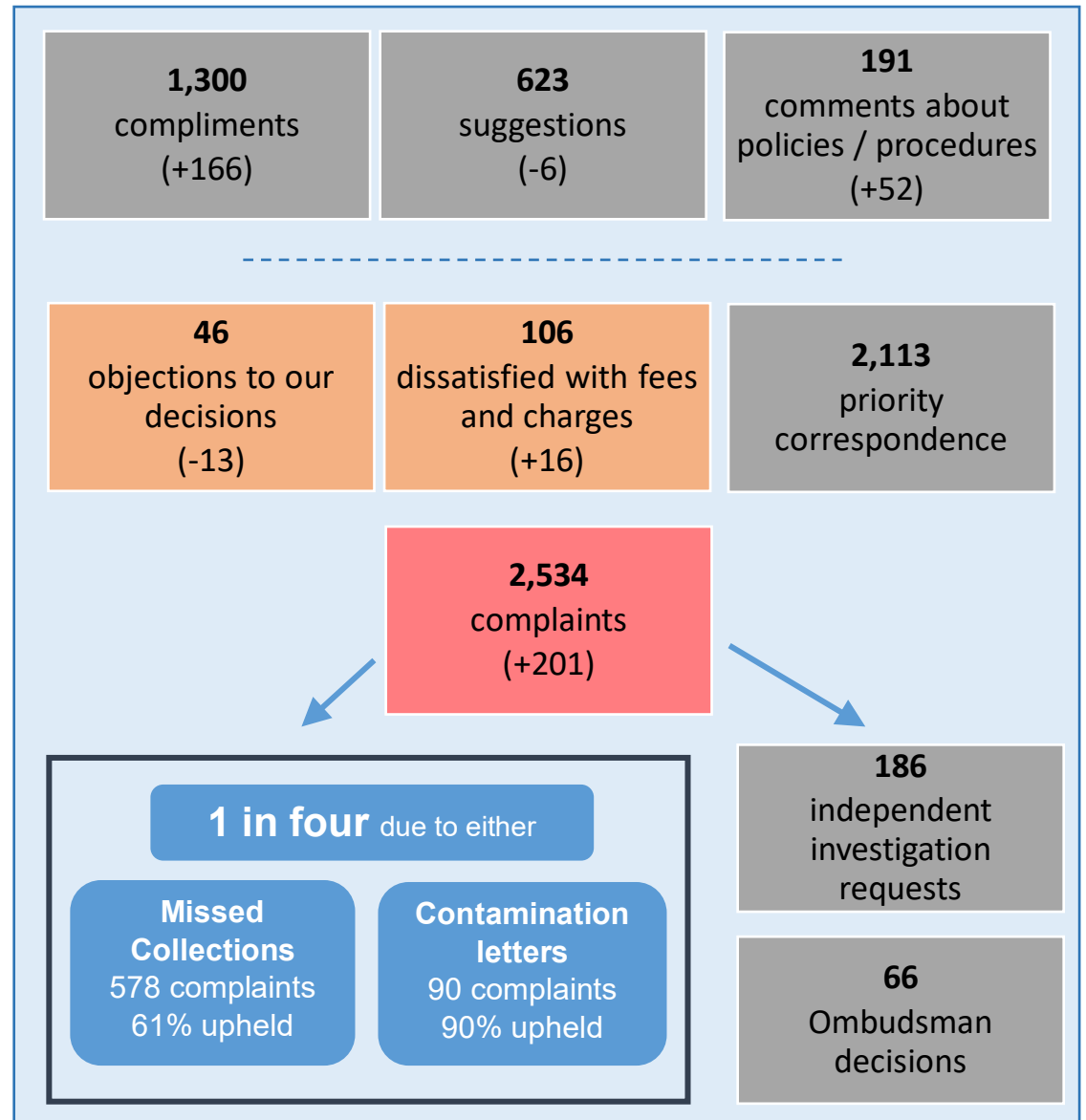
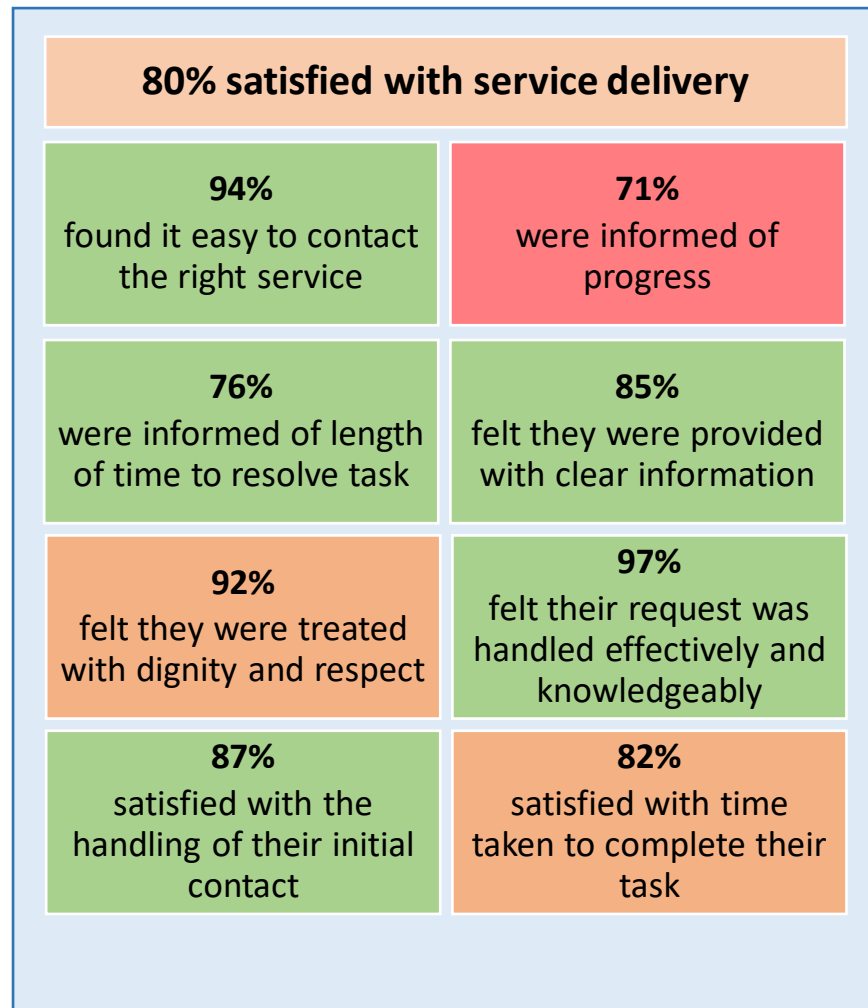
digitally enabled. However, this could be a consequence of COVID-19 restrictions reducing our ability to engage with our non-digital target audience.

- 8 Of those respondents who stated they preferred to access services using the telephone or online self-serve (the majority), most were able to undertake activities online, having access to devices and connectivity to the internet. A small number of customers, who stated their preference for accessing services was face-to-face, were unable to access services during the pandemic period. We plan to reopen our Customer Access Points on 21 June 2021.
- 9 12% of respondents said they would like additional help to access online support, advice and services.
- 10 We have extremely limited data for calls received outside our Automated Call Distribution (ACD) system⁷. By migrating telephone lines to the ACD systems, we can view demand and performance statistics, and thereby identify opportunities to improve the customer experience.
- 11 Therefore, when viewing our telephone statistics, it is important to remember that they only include data from our ACD system. As we migrate lines from non-ACD sources, not only does the overall call volume increase, but as there is no back data associated with the transferred lines, any comparisons with previous time periods can be misleading as it appears as if telephone calls to the council are increasing.
- 12 Although latest data shows overall contact by telephone has increased, detailed analysis carried out during the quarter shows there has been a reduction in telephone contact – but it has been masked by the additional call volume from lines transferred to the ACD system over the last 18 months. We estimate that overall call volume is around 20% lower than we would have expected.
- 13 However, some reductions in call volume are due to digital advancements. More customers are using our virtual Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) system to self-serve so our general enquiries team is handling fewer calls.

⁷ Broadly speaking, we receive telephone calls either through our Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) system, which routes calls to groups of agents in line with 'first-in-first-answered' criteria, or directly to a telephone extension (non-ACD).

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

Summary^{8,9}



⁸ (data relates to the 12 months ending 31 March 2021, compared to the previous year where applicable)

⁹ Satisfaction data is from the CRM closure process (based on 13,260 responses)

Customer Satisfaction

- 14 Over the last 12 months, we received more than 13,260 responses to our automated customer satisfaction survey (from the CRM closure process), which we acknowledge is a relatively small proportion of overall service delivery. We continue to explore options to increase the response rate (including improved capture of email addresses and exploration of other contact channels) to expand the range of customer feedback and insight received.
- 15 Of those who did respond, the main reason for dissatisfaction with service delivery continues to be not resolving the issue long-term.
- 16 Four services accounted for more than half of the responses received:

	Found it easy to contact the right service	Were informed how long it would take to resolve task	were informed of progress	were satisfied with service delivery
Missed Collection (4,327)	95%	83%	58%	76%
Fly-tipping (1,015)	98%	73%	83%	86%
Council tax account (863)	96%	77%	92%	96%
Street lighting (790)	96%	83%	77%	86%

- 17 We believe the variation in number of responses and satisfaction levels is due to the emotiveness of the issue, with more emotive requests encouraging greater participation.

Customer Compliments

- 18 In line with previous reports, most of the 1,300 compliments received relate to satisfaction with service provision. Others related to the actions of specific individuals.
- 19 A small sample of the 334 compliments received during quarter four, 2020/21 is attached at Appendix 1. Of these compliments, 50 thanked us for maintaining service provision (mainly bin collections and gritting) throughout the period of wintery weather.

Customer Suggestions

- 20 During the 12 months ending 31 March, we received 629 suggestions, almost one-third of which related to our household waste collection service.
- 21 However, although we receive a considerable number of suggestions, the majority have been addressed previously and/or considered as part of service development.

Comments about our policies and procedures, objections to our decision making and dissatisfaction with fees and charges

- 22 More than half of this feedback related to two areas:

	No. of comments received	% of feedback
HWRC Policies and Procedures	76	25%
Refuse and Recycling Policy (not collecting side waste /not emptying contaminated bins)	72	23%
Objections to operational decisions (waste collection, highway works)	19	6%
Waste charges	19	6%

Customer complaints

- 23 Within this document each of the complaint types (statutory complaints that arise from our duties as a local social services authority and corporate complaints that cover all other complaints) is subject to its own processes and policy, so is reported separately.

STATUTORY COMPLAINTS

ADULT AND HEALTH SERVICES

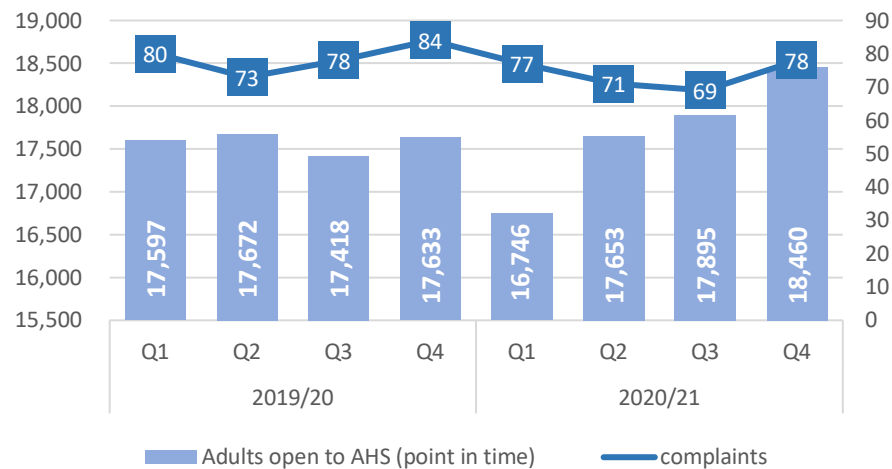
78
complaints

-3
(down 4%)

11.5% upheld
22% partially upheld

100%
completed within
timescale

Trend - Service users and complaints



CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICE

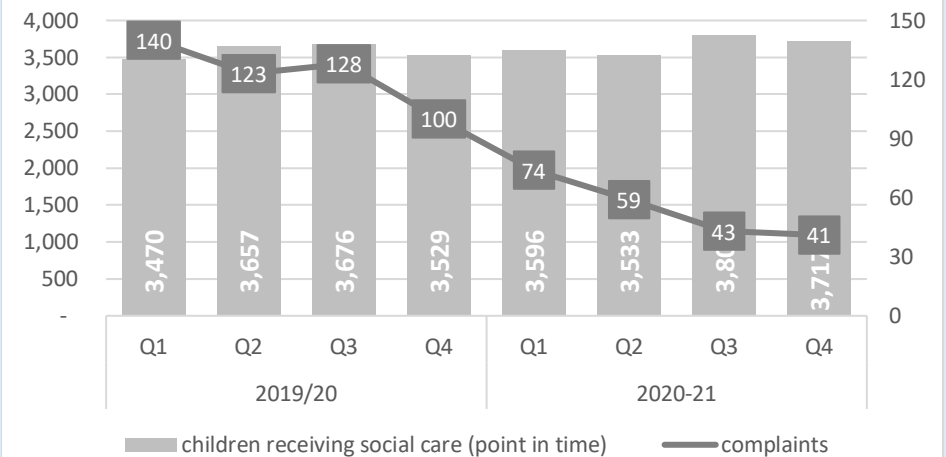
41
complaints

-59
(down 59%)

7% upheld
24% partially upheld

73%
completed within
timescale

Trend - Service users and complaints



Statutory complaints

- 24 As at 31 March 2021, Adult and Health Services were supporting more than 18,000 people, and Children and Young People's Services were supporting approximately 3,700 children and young people.
- 25 Each service has their own distinct and separate statutory complaints procedures, so the complaints made under each of these procedures are not directly comparable. Generally, users of Adult and Health Services have voluntarily requested access to the service so that their eligible social care and support needs can be assessed and met, whilst the involvement of Children and Young People's Services is primarily due to a child or young person being in need or at risk of significant harm.

Adult and Health Services

- 26 Of the 78 complaints received, 29% related to the older people/physical disabilities/sensory impairment service area (23 complaints), 20% to the learning disabilities/mental health/substance misuse service area (16 complaints) and 23% to external providers linked to the commissioning service (18 complaints). Most notably, the category of "COVID-19 related", added at the start of the pandemic as a reason for making a statutory social care complaint, had the highest number of submissions (21).
- 27 During quarter four, in response to complaints received, we:
- (a) considered how social workers or nurses can check that service users have felt supported throughout the review process and reaffirmed that reviews should be carried out with service users.
 - (b) checked a care provider was adhering to COVID-19 procedures which reduce virus spread and control infection when residents test positive.
 - (c) refreshed training for all frontline staff who deal with the estates of deceased service users.

Children and Young People's Services

- 28 51% of complaints related to disputed decisions (21 complaints).
- 29 Of the complaints received during quarter four, one was partially upheld. This complaint related to a manager's comments, made within a professionals-only meeting, the notes of which were subsequently shared with a carer as part of a Subject Access Request. Staff will be reminded of the need to record information accurately and sensitively, as records can be requested by service users at any time.

Corporate Complaints

- 30 In line with previous reports, half of all corporate complaints received during quarter four related to our waste collection service. Of these, half related to missed bin collections. However, it is important to note that of the 13 million bins collected each year, fewer than 0.2% of households submit a complaint.
- 31 To help reduce this type of avoidable customer contact, we are continuing to inform households via text message (where we are able) when crews are unable to collect their bin (due to, for example, access issues, inclement weather).
- 32 Crews have been reminded of the importance of checking addresses before logging contamination – to help reduce the number of complaints across this area.

Corporate complaints subjected to independent investigation

- 33 During the 12 months ending 31 March 2021, 186 complainants were dissatisfied with the response to their complaint (44 during quarter four) and asked for it to be escalated to independent investigation by the Customer Feedback Team.



**all investigations aim be completed within 30 working days*

- 34 Throughout 2020/21, we completed complaint investigations within 21 days on average, compared to 28 days in 2019/20. This followed the transfer of the complaint telephone line into the Corporate Contact Centre, which streamlined our first point of contact service delivery and created additional capacity within the customer feedback team to support more complex complaint investigations.
- 35 Details of complaints upheld by independent investigators during quarter four are included in Appendix 2.

Complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (the Ombudsman)

36 During 2020/21, the Ombudsman delivered decisions relating to 66 complaints. Conclusions were reached based on details supplied by complainants, and in some instances, supplemented with contextual information from council officers.

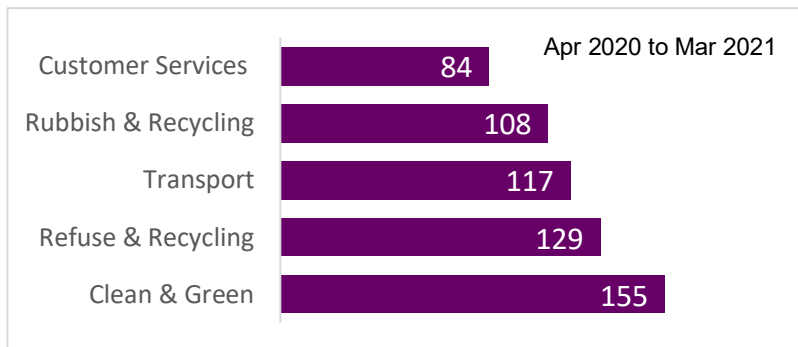
37 The 20 decisions delivered during quarter four are shown below:



38 Details of complaints upheld by the Ombudsman during quarter four are included in Appendix 3.

39 Additional information regarding complaints escalated to the Ombudsman is available [here](#).

Appendix 1: Sample of compliments received during quarter four, 2020/21



Care Connect don't get enough praise for all the support they have done over this last year, during the pandemic they have been into peoples' houses caring for them and getting the help they needed, fantastic job all of you.

thank you so very much for helping with the flooding in the street. The lads worked very hard and very late to help clear the access water coming from a nearby farmers field

Thanks to officer from welfare rights for their extremely efficient , polite and patient assistance

I would like you to recognise the excellent customer service I received from a lovely lady this afternoon. She was most helpful and was grateful to her. She was outstanding..

Customer would like to pass on a massive thank you to the gentleman that cleans the parks on a Monday. He had gone out of his way to put a slab down and empty the dog bin even through it was flooded. This meant it was still usable

Amazing service looked after my mam when she needed the help.

Christmas tree collected today – thanks for the service.

very appreciative of swift service.

Thanks for the help they gave his wife during the night. He stated they were highly professional. And they arrived promptly.

extremely polite and helpful and went that extra mile to sort query.

Swift action in the removal of fly-tipping, please pass on my thanks

the officer was fantastic, explained their situation to them and made them feel much more in control of the situation

Would like to pass on his gratitude for being so helpful and giving a thorough explanation about his benefits and regarding the overpayments. it was dealt with very quickly and efficiently.

thank you for the new lights - nice and bright and neighbours feel a lot safer

the determination of the refuse collectors this morning on our estate was nothing but amazing. From shortly after 7am they arrived on the estate with 3-5cm of snow. Built on a hillside it is difficult to leave or access when it's icy or snowing. Several attempts later he has made it to the upper most part of the estate. The determination of the team this morning was tremendous. Many would have given up at the first hurdle. You should be proud to have such determined colleagues within your organisation.

thanks for gritting the paths and the road where Brandon Lane Surgery is. The whole path going up the hill and the road had been done, which really removed the stress of having to go to the practice to take elderly family for jabs. They did a great job.

a huge thank you to the 2 guys who helped my daughter get to work today. Her car was stuck on the bank and she was on late shift at Sunderland Hospital. Not only did these guys plough the bank but also helped her dig her car out.

Appendix 2: Independent investigations by Customer Feedback Team where corporate complaints were upheld

Complaint upheld	Recommendation
Customer dissatisfied that the garden waste bin was not emptied on a number of occasions	Refund of garden waste subscription. Apology for the time taken to resolve the matter.
Customer dissatisfied that we did not collect their bulky waste when stated.	Refund of the bulky collection fee.

Complaint partially upheld	Recommendation
Customer dissatisfied with outcome of complaint regarding privacy distances between dwellings not being adhered to.	Apology to customer. £250 payment for the upset and inconvenience caused
Customer dissatisfied with outcome of planning decision which was not consistent with previous local applications.	Apology to customer for failing to provide a timely response.
Customer dissatisfied with the lack of response to correspondence to ensure new disabled resident would access council services.	Apology for not acknowledging correspondence.

Appendix 3: Complaints upheld by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (the Ombudsman)

Ombudsman's final decision	Agreed action
The council was at fault for not ensuring the provision in Section F of an Education, Health and Care Plan was secured from 2016 onwards.	To apologise and to pay £1,000 for the distress and time and trouble taken to pursue the complaint, and £7,200 for the lost provision of special educational support.
The council was at fault for the poor care service provided by its commissioned care provider.	To apologise, to pay £500 to the complainant, and monitor the contractor's future performance.
The council was at fault in how it investigated the complaint at Stage two of its complaints procedure.	To apologise for the fault identified, and to pay £150 in recognition of the avoidable distress caused.
The council was at fault following fully upholding a complaint but failing to offer any remedy for the injustice or properly explain how the situation arose.	To pay £500 in recognition of the injustice caused.