



Northern Ireland Ambulance Service
Health and Social Care Trust



Service User Feedback Team
Annual Report
2023-2024

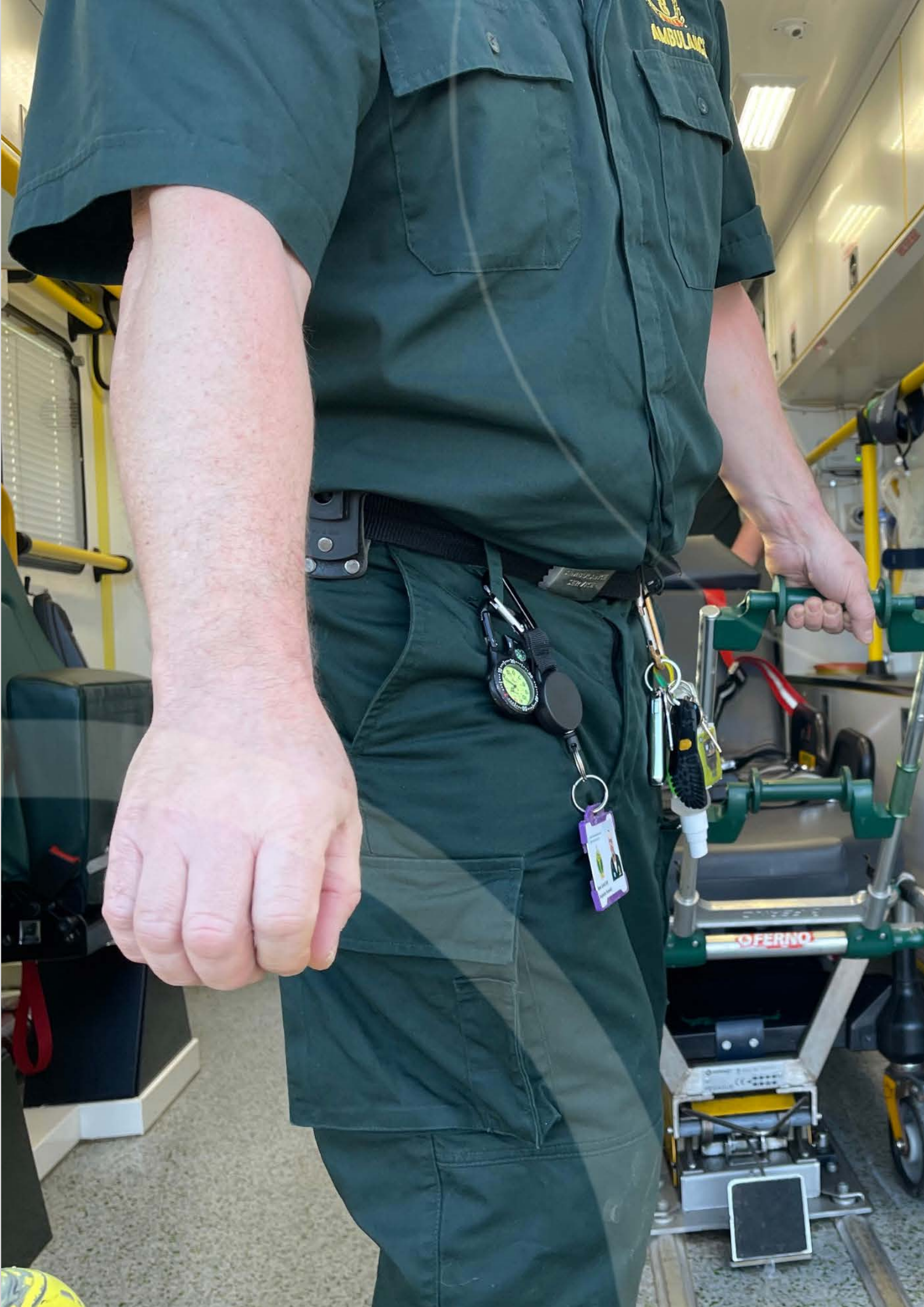
To consistently
show compassion,
professionalism
and respect to the
patients we care for



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Foreword

As the Director of Quality, Safety, and Improvement (QSI) at the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS), I am pleased to present the annual report detailing complaints and compliments received throughout the 2023/2024 financial year. We place great importance on the feedback received from our patients, their relatives, caregivers, advocates, and other service users through our complaints and compliments processes.

Throughout the period of 2023/2024, we received a total of 241 complaints, an increase from the 208 complaints received in the previous year (2022/2023). This equates to a complaint rate of 0.07% of all emergency and non-emergency ambulance attendances (326,439). Conversely, we received 395 compliments during this time, representing a slight decrease from the 406 compliments received in 2022/2023.

Understanding the numbers and types of complaints and compliments received is vital for assessing our performance in handling and managing these feedback channels. However, we understand that beyond these statistics lie the genuine experiences of our patients, which we acknowledge have not always been positive.

We highly value the learning opportunities presented by both complaints and compliments, as they contribute significantly to improving our services and enhancing the patient experience. Therefore, we are committed to managing complaints and compliments in an open, compassionate, constructive and professional manner. Where issues are identified or improvements are needed, we have robust processes in place to address them promptly and prevent recurrence.

In addition to learning from complaints, we greatly appreciate each and every compliment received. Compliments offer valuable insights into what made an experience positive, guiding us in shaping our services to deliver optimal care. We make it a priority to share every compliment with the staff involved, as this recognition

has a profound impact, particularly during times of increased pressure within the Health and Social Care system.

I would finally like to acknowledge the compassion and dedication demonstrated by our service user feedback team as they work to continuously improve our service and support the individuals who use, for some at the most difficult and challenging times of their lives.

Lynne Charlton
Director of Quality, Safety and Improvement
Northern Ireland Ambulance Service



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About NIAS

NIAS provides high-quality urgent & emergency care and treatment as well as scheduled, non-emergency patient transport services for the all the population of Northern Ireland.





NIAS Facts and Figures



In 2023/2024:

NIAS received **230,503** emergency calls (2% increase on previous year), attended **172,868** calls and completed

153,571 (3% decrease) non-emergency journeys.

241 complaints were received. This represents a complaint rate of **0.07%** of all (326,439) emergency and non-emergency ambulance attendances, and **0.10%** were of all emergency 999 calls received.

232 complaints were closed.

The top three complaints were:

- 1) **Staff Attitude/Behaviour**
- 2) **Delays in emergency ambulance response; and**
- 3) **Delays or non-provision of non-emergency transport.**



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Achievements

- **99%** of complaints were acknowledged within 2 working days.
- **395** compliments were received.
- Complaints responded to within 20 working days increased from **36%** during the 2022/23 period to **44%** during 23/24.
- Complaints responded to within 21 to 40 working days increased from **10%** during 2022/23 period to **22%** during 23/24.
- Re-opened complaints remained low at **1%** (3) of total complaints closed (232)
- No investigations related to complaints received within NIAS were undertaken by the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).
- Improved access and information for service users wishing to submit their feedback via the website, which has seen an uplift in complaints being submitted via the web form from 3 complaints during the first half of the year, to 23 during the second half; whereas 28 compliments were submitted via the web form in the first half of the year compared to 80 during the second half, following the changes made.
- Development of service user feedback leaflets and small cards for staff to handout and posters for inside vehicles to improve feedback.
- Service user and staff feedback surveys developed to capture valuable feedback on the complaints process to inform improvement plans.





Effectiveness & Responsiveness of Complaints Handling Procedures

Openness & Honesty to our Service Users, Families and Carers

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Health and Social Care Trust is committed to improving the safety and quality of the care we deliver to the public. Openness and honest communication is actively encouraged in the organisation.

What is an Open and Fair Culture

We appreciate that promoting a culture of openness is vital to improving service user safety and the quality of health and social care systems. The organisation continues to work to develop a culture of openness where staff feel that they can be open about complaints they have been involved in, are treated fairly and where both the organisation and staff are accountable for their actions.

In each of our complaint responses we endeavour to ensure we acknowledge, apologise and explain when things go wrong, and in keeping with the complainants wishes we aim to conduct a thorough investigation into the complaint reassuring service users, their families and carers that lessons learned will help prevent the incident recurring.

It is crucial to monitor the efficiency and responsiveness of the complaints handling process to ensure that it is reflective of an environment where feedback is welcomed, encouraged, and attentively heard.

Incorporating the experiences of those providing feedback is vital for continuously improving the delivery of our services.

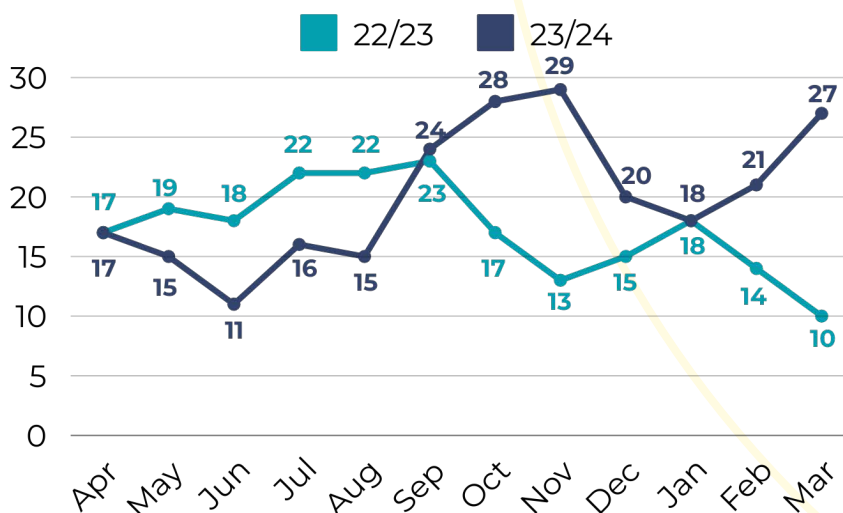




Number of Complaints Received

During 2023/2024, the Trust received 241 complaints, which is an increase from the previous year's total of 208.

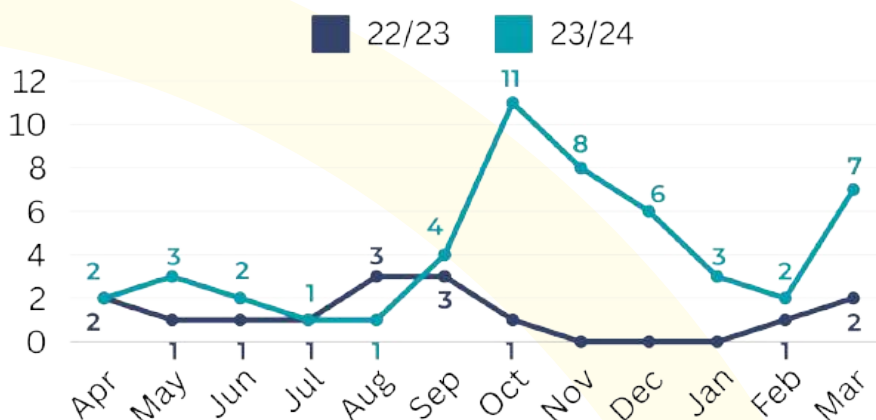
No. of complaints by month opened



Analysis of the increase in complaints received shows these primarily related to complaints regarding delays and/or non-provision of non-emergency ambulances by NIAS's Patient Care Service (PCS).

The chart below compares the number of PCS complaints relating to delays and/or provision of non-emergency ambulances received 2022/23 versus 2023/24.

Complaints re delays and non-provision of non-emergency ambulances



The increase in complaints from October 2023 followed the re-introduction of multi-occupancy PCS journeys to increase the number of patient journeys we could deliver on, which regrettably for a small group of patients in one specific Division resulted in repeated delays and/or non-provision of non-emergency ambulances and repeated complaints.

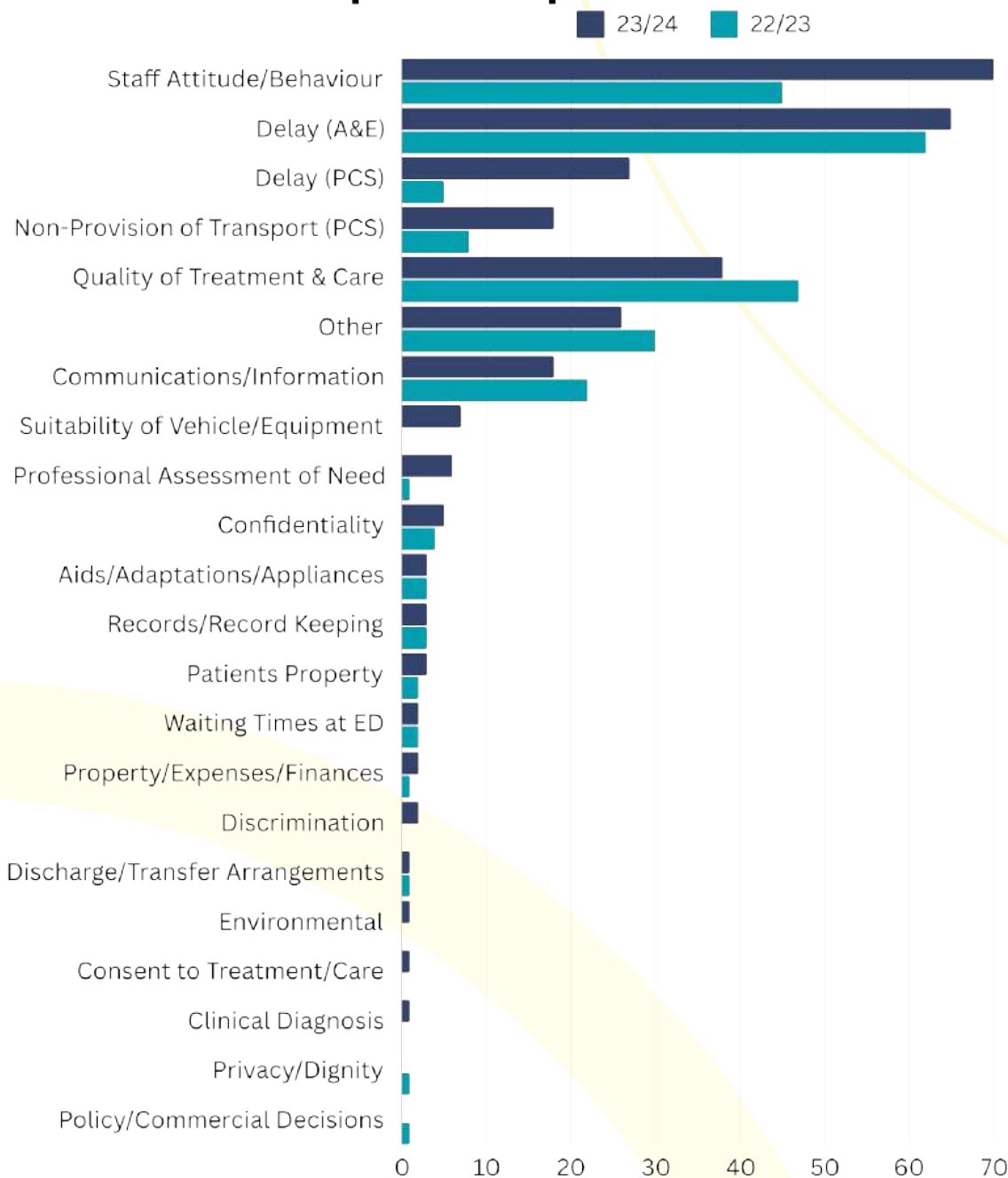
The learning from these complaints has been multifaceted and includes how changes are communicated with service users, route planning, run sheet information, drop shift management and the consolidation of learning through the development of standard operating procedures. Implementation of these changes has seen a reduction in the number of these types of complaints being received.



What People Complained About

Some complaints are multifaceted which results in a higher number of concerns (310) recorded compared to the number of complaints received (241). The chart below shows what people complained about during 2023/2024 compared with the previous year.

What People Complained About



The top three areas of concern raised in the past year were: Staff Attitude & Behaviour (70); Delay in emergency ambulance response (65); and delay or non-arrival of non-emergency ambulance transportation (52).

The most notable change seen was an increase in concerns regarding staff attitude and behaviour, such as poor communication in challenging situations or a lack of empathy shown, and concerns regarding a delay or non-provision of non-emergency ambulance transportation.

Other notable changes during 2023/2024 include a decrease in concerns regarding the quality of care provided.



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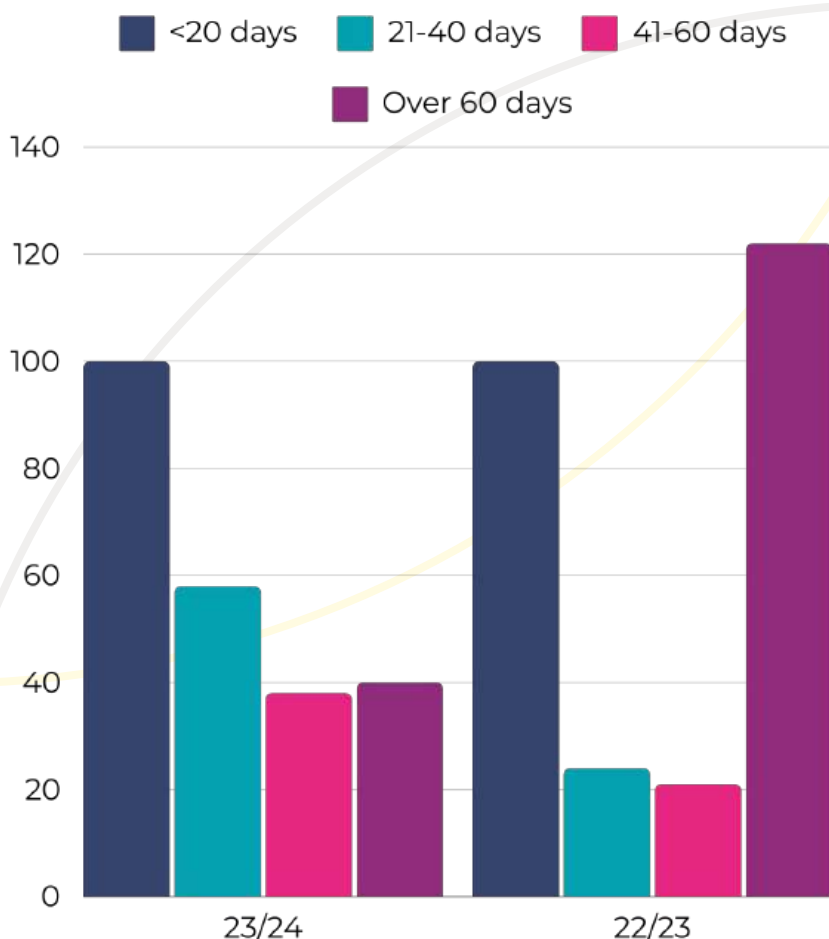




Timeliness of our Response to Complaints

The total number of closed complaints during 2022/23 was 277 and in 2023/24 it was 232. Some closed cases within any given year will have been received during the previous fiscal year, which gives rise to more complaints being closed that received within the year. The chart below shows the timeliness of the complaints closed during 2023/24 compared to the previous year.

Timeliness of Closed Complaints



Like our counterparts throughout Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, NIAS encountered system-wide pressures that posed challenges for promptly completing complaint investigations. During the 2023/24 period, for 8 consecutive weeks NIAS entered Resource Escalation Action Plan (REAP) Level 2 (moderate pressure) between 16 April 2022 and 10 June 2022. Outside of this period, with the exception of two further weeks – one later on in June 2023 and another in March 2024 - the service

operated in either REAP Level 3 (major pressure) or Level 4 (extreme pressure).

As our complaints are investigated by the same senior frontline staff who become heavily involved in responding to the REAP escalation plans, when they reach levels 3 and 4, this impacts the prioritisation of their work load to ensure operational capacity can remain at its highest. During periods of REAP levels 3 and 4, it also makes it challenging for operational crews to be stood down in order to assist

with an investigation.

Despite the significant and prolonged periods of major and extreme pressure during 2023/24, NIAS witnessed a notable reduction in the number of complaints responded to over 40 working days compared to the 2022/23 period.

The Trust remains dedicated to enhancing the quality of its complaints handling procedures and expediting the resolution of these complaints.



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Re-visited Complaints

While we endeavour to provide a response which fully addresses the areas identified within the complaint, at times, individuals may be dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint investigation. During 2023/24, the Trust re-opened three complaints for further investigation due to the person providing feedback being dissatisfied with the substantive response they received.

We encourage our complainants to inform us of their dissatisfaction, in order for us to re-visit their concerns and explore alternative options to address these. We also extend invitations to meet with complainants, as we acknowledge that this facilitates in-depth discussions in person and enables any questions or concerns to be addressed. Additionally, we inform complainants about the free and confidential advice and advocacy support provided by the Patient Client Council.

Ombudsman Investigations

For those who remain unsatisfied having exhausted the Trust's complaints procedures, they have the opportunity to directly approach the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) for an independent review of the Trust's complaints handling process.

In the 2023/24 period, three complaints were referred to NIPSO for review, however none of these were accepted by NIPSO for investigation.

Feedback from Service Users and Staff

As the 2023/24 period drew to a close, an online survey was created with the support of NIAS's Patient Voice Forum. The survey aimed to gather feedback from service users regarding the Trust's complaints policy, as well as from staff involved, serving as an additional method for assessing the process's effectiveness.

Moving forward, these surveys will be distributed five weeks after the closure of complaints starting from April 2024. All feedback received will play a significant role in enhancing the service and its performance.





Learning from Complaints

We embrace complaints as valuable opportunities for learning and enhancing our services. When applicable, complaints are thoroughly discussed with the staff involved to gain a deeper understanding of the issues raised and to reflect on potential areas for improvement and best practices. Staff development is further supported by Divisional Training Officers and Clinical Support Officers, aimed at enhancing the quality of service delivery.

Throughout the 2023/24 period, a total of 117 recommendations were generated from complaint investigations, with 90 of these recommendations being implemented by the end of March 2024. Most of these recommendations have focused on providing additional counselling and/or training to support staff in their roles to prevent a recurrence of the issues raised.

Examples of counselling/further training recommended to support our staff include:

- Communication:
 - How to manage confrontational situations.
 - How to effectively communicate with service users' families.
 - Raising awareness of how comments, which may intend to be light hearted, can cause offense.
- Ensuring the safety of equipment and service users' belongings during transportation to prevent them from moving about.
- Conducting thorough mobility assessments for transferring service users to ambulances.
- Completion of comprehensive Patient Report Forms (PRF).
- How to assess a service users' level of consciousness using pressure stimuli.

Additionally, various learning initiatives have been implemented during this period, including:

- A memo reminding all staff of the required driving standards when responding under emergency conditions.
- A memo to all Clinical Support Desk staff, emphasizing the importance of updating call notes to explain any delays between call acceptance and triage.
- Input on the development of an Information Marker policy based on lessons learned from complaints.

- Updating Standard Operating Procedures and providing guidance to Controllers in the Emergency Ambulance Control Room on allocating urgent calls requested by Healthcare Professionals.
- Updating the PRF policy to clarify documentation requirements when a patient cannot be located at the scene.
- Independent Ambulance Service smoking policy and driving policy updated to include the prohibition of using e-cigarettes.



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Compliments

Whilst the Trust recognises that we don't always get things right, each year the Trust receives hundreds of letters of appreciation and expressions of thanks to acknowledge the excellent services provided.

We are proud of our staff and ensure that positive feedback is shared and celebrated. Our staff certainly appreciate feedback from their patients and clients, and knowing when things go well.

In 2023/2024, the Trust received 395 compliments.

The below illustrates the themes captured within the compliments received.





Examples of Compliments Received

Each week a sample of the compliments received during the week are shared with all staff through the Daily Bulletin. Here are a few positive experiences shared by service users and/or their families:

Compliment 1:

“Recently because of an incident which happened at Southlake's Leisure Centre in Craigavon, a paramedic attended my friend and in a very timely manner. The paramedic quickly assessed the situation and took control of the situation. His manner was professional, friendly and courteous to my friend and to me. Another crew came along to transfer my friend to hospital - both equally kind and efficient. They were then called away to another emergency in the building and my friend was transferred to hospital by another excellent efficient and knowledgeable team. My friend and I had great confidence in all of them. They really knew what they were doing. All of them are such an asset to the ambulance service in NI. Great role models. I'm in awe of how knowledgeable you are. Thank you so very much, you are amazing.”

Compliment 2:

“I would just like to express my family's gratitude and appreciation for the care shown to my grandmother during a recent acute illness. My grandmother is 94 years old and had taken acutely unwell with norovirus and was unable to keep fluids down. The rapid response paramedic, along with a second year paramedic student, attended very promptly after being denied access to the GP all day. They administered IM ondansetron for nausea and this allowed my grandmother to keep fluids down. They also arranged a non-urgent ambulance however due to the IM antiemetic my grandmother was well enough to stay at home. Less than 12 hours later she was back to her normal self. We are extremely grateful and relieved that she no longer required hospital especially during the current pressures on both the ambulance service and secondary care. Thank you again.”

Compliment 3:

“A crew attended my parents' home when my father was very distressed and agitated requiring immediate transport to hospital accompanied by the PSNI. I followed and we then waited at Antrim A&E for approximately five hours in the ambulance until space was available. During that time, both these men treated my father with the upmost compassion and care. He was agitated and confused and they were extremely gentle and caring towards him. They supported me during this process and even brought Daddy tea and chocolate biscuits and toast! I cannot express my gratitude to these guys. They are an absolute credit to themselves and the Ambulance Service. I genuinely felt as if they cared about Daddy and his dignity in the midst of immense stress and noise of a busy ambulance bay and A&E department - they kept the environment as calm and peaceful as they possibly could and advocated for him with the varying staff and departments. Thank you!”

Plans for 2024/2025

Some of the key priorities for the team in the year ahead are:



Reduce the average timeframe for complaint response – changes to processes in complaint management should support quicker resolution of complaints.

Introduce and embed the new NIPSO Model Complaints Handling Procedures – which is planned to be introduced across all HSC Trusts, including NIAS, by the end of 2024/2025.

Support complaints investigation training – ensure that managers investigating complaints have the relevant training to conduct an investigation which is balanced, open and objective.

Review internal mechanisms to improve the use of service user feedback data to inform service improvements, priorities, and strategies.

Capture and assess demographic data – better understand who is complaining and what barriers may exist to raising a complaint.



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