



Northern Ireland Ambulance Service  
Health and Social Care Trust



# Service User Feedback Annual Report

2024-2025







# Table of Contents

- 02** Foreword
- 03** Facts and Figures
- 05** Complaints Received
- 06** Effectiveness & Responsiveness of Complaints Handling Procedures
- 11** Feedback from Service Users and Staff
- 13** Learning from Complaints
- 16** Compliments
- 19** Plans for 2025/26

# Foreword

**As Director of Quality, Safety and Improvement at the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS), I am pleased to introduce our annual report on complaints and compliments for the 2024/25 financial year. Feedback from patients, families, carers, advocates and other service users remains a critical element of how we monitor and enhance the quality of our services.**

During 2024/25, NIAS received 276 complaints, an increase on the 241 recorded in the previous year (2023/24). This figure represents a complaint rate of 0.07% of the total 391,115 emergency and non-emergency attendances. Alongside this, 450 compliments were received, marking a welcome rise from the 395 received the previous year.

While quantitative data helps to highlight themes and trends, it is the personal stories behind each complaint or compliment that matter most. We recognise that every contact represents a real experience and, in some cases, a failure to meet the standards we strive to meet.

We remain committed to handling all feedback with empathy, transparency, and a focus on learning. Complaints provide an opportunity to reflect, identify areas for improvement, and embed changes that reduce the likelihood of recurrence. Equally, compliments help us to understand what worked well and enable us to celebrate best practice. Every expression of appreciation is shared directly with the staff involved, recognising their commitment and dedication, particularly in the wider context of the Trust facing ongoing and significant pressure.

This year, we welcomed the outcome of a BSO Internal Audit which provided satisfactory assurance in relation to how NIAS manages complaints. The audit confirmed that complaints are handled in line with Department of Health guidance, with appropriate oversight, learning, and record-keeping arrangements in place.

Looking ahead, we are preparing for the implementation of the new Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP) issued by the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. We look forward to the opportunities this new framework will bring – helping us to streamline processes, enhance consistency, and ensure the experience of using our complaints procedure is a constructive and positive one for all service users.

I would like to extend my thanks to the Service User Feedback Team, whose professionalism, compassion and dedication ensure that concerns are addressed with care and that improvements are pursued in the interest of delivering safer, more responsive, and person-centred care.

Finally, I would also like to express my thanks to our Operational Crews, our Service Managers and to all who support with the management of complaints, concerns and compliments and who actively ensure that NIAS is an organisation that learns and improves through the experiences of our patients, their advocates and our staff.

**Lynne Charlton**

**Director of Quality, Safety, and Improvement**





# Facts and Figures

In the year 2024/2025:



Emergency Calls Received

**232,147** +0.7%



Emergency Calls Attended

**173, 695** +0.5%



Non-Emergency Journeys

**158,968** +3.5%

**276** Complaints received  
 +15%

**450** Compliments received  
 +14%

**6**

Complaints to Northern  
Ireland Public Services  
Ombudsman (NIPSO)

**1**

Complaint accepted for  
investigation by NIPSO, the  
outcome of which has not yet  
been received.

**100%** of complaints were acknowledged within  
2 working days.

**48%** of complaints were responded to within  
20 working days

+4%

**4%** of total complaints closed were  
re-opened.

## Top 3 Issues of Complaint:



**Transportation**

late/non-arrival/journey time



**Staff attitude/  
behaviour**



**Quality of treatment  
and care provided**

## Feedback

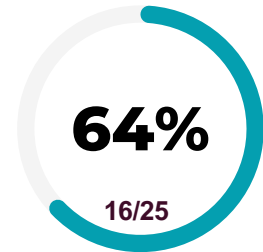
27 Service User and 1 staff feedback surveys were returned to capture feedback on the complaints process.



advised that it was **easy**,  
**extremely easy** or provided a  
**neutral response** when  
asked how easy it was to  
submit their complaint.



advised that communication  
during the process was either  
**clear and informative**,  
**adequate** or provided a  
**neutral response**.



advised that they were very  
satisfied, somewhat satisfied  
or had a neutral overall  
experience of the complaints  
process.



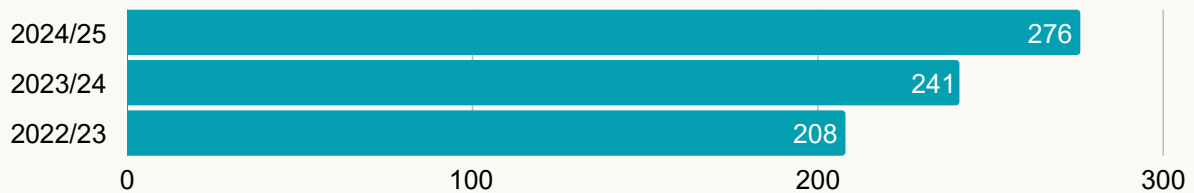




# Complaints Received

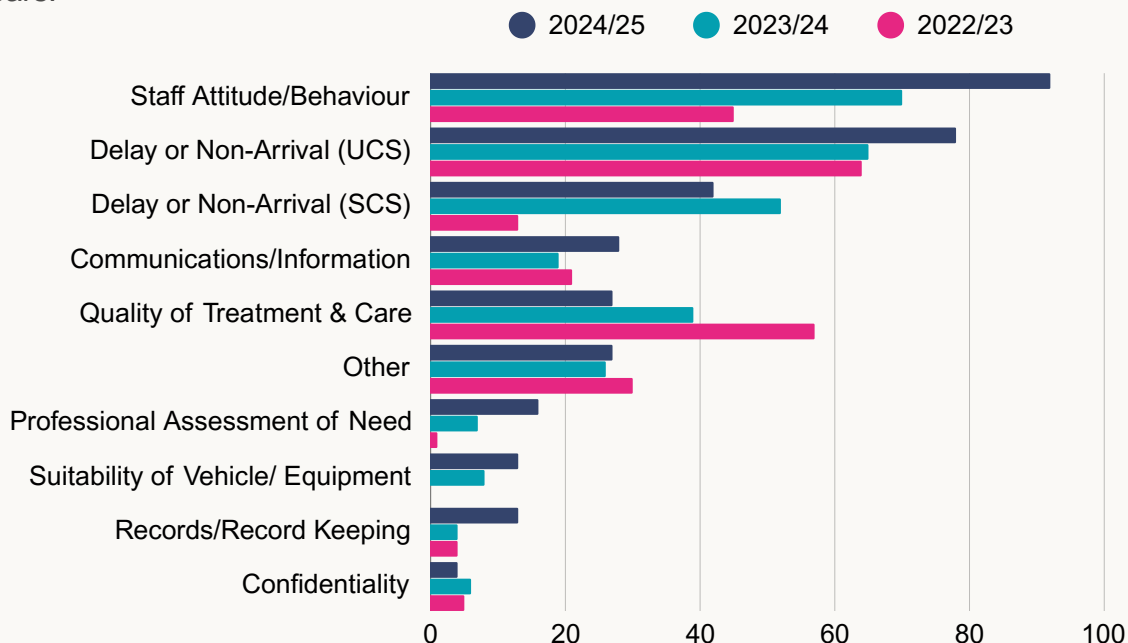
## Number of complaints received

During 2024/2025, the Trust received **276** complaints, which is a **15% increase** from the previous year's total of **241**, and **33% increase** since 2022/23.



## What people complained about

Some complaints are multifaceted which results in a higher number of concerns (347) recorded compared to the number of complaints received (276). The chart below shows the top 10 concerns people complained about during 2024/25 compared with the previous 2 years.



There have been notable increases in specific types of concerns raised, which primarily relate to:

- Reports of poor staff attitude and behaviour
- Delays in emergency ambulance response times
- Concerns about the manner in which ambulances were driven (classified under the 'Other' category)
- Dissatisfaction with paramedics' decisions not to transfer patients to an Emergency Department (recorded under the 'Professional Assessment of Need' category)

In contrast, 2024/25 has also seen a reduction in concerns relating to the quality of care provided and delays or non-arrival of non-emergency ambulances.



# Effectiveness & Responsiveness of Complaints Handling Procedures

## Openness & Honesty to our Service Users, Families and Carers

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service is committed to delivering safe, high-quality care and fostering open, honest communication.

## Open and Fair Culture

We recognise that a culture of openness is essential to improving safety and quality. Staff are encouraged to speak openly about concerns, with the assurance of fair treatment and accountability at all levels.

In responding to complaints, we aim to acknowledge, apologise, and explain when things go wrong, ensuring thorough investigations aligned with the wishes of the complainant. We strive to reassure service users, families, and carers that lessons learned will help prevent recurrence.

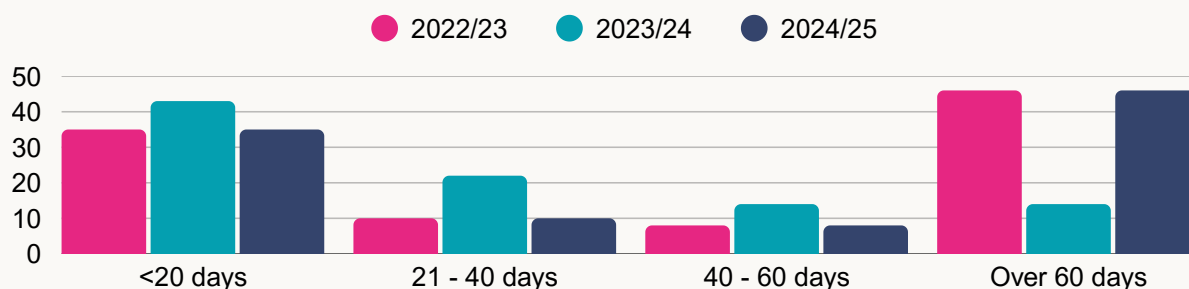
Monitoring the efficiency and responsiveness of our complaints process is vital to maintaining a culture where feedback is welcomed and drives continuous service improvement.





# Timeliness of our Response to Complaints

During 2024/25, **48%** of the 266 complaints closed **were responded to within 20 working days**, a **4% increase** on the previous year. The chart below shows the timeliness of the complaints closed over a three year period.



Like other Health and Social Care organisations across Northern Ireland, NIAS continued to face system-wide pressures that impacted the timely completion of complaint investigations. During 2024/25, NIAS operated at REAP Level 2 (moderate pressure) for a total of nine weeks—from 8 April to 7 May and 13 May to 17 June 2024. For the remainder of the period, the service was predominantly at REAP Level 3 (major pressure), with three weeks at Level 4 (extreme pressure).

As complaint investigations are undertaken by senior frontline staff who are also heavily engaged in responding to REAP Level 3 and 4 escalation plans, their capacity to prioritise complaints is impacted in order to maintain operational readiness. During these periods of heightened pressure, it is also increasingly difficult to release operational crews to support complaint investigations.

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

## Complaints Referred as Serious Adverse Incidents

Where complaints are identified as potentially high risk, they are reviewed by a cohort of senior managers from Operations, Quality Safety and Improvement (SQI), Medical and Clinical teams (referred to as the Rapid Review Group). This multidisciplinary review considers whether the incident that led to the complaint meets the threshold to be referred and managed under the Serious Adverse Incident (SAI) process, ensuring appropriate escalation and oversight.

During 2024/25, 4 complaints met the criteria and were referred for progressing under the SAI process.



## Re-visited Complaints

While we strive to provide responses that fully address all aspects of a complaint, there are occasions where individuals remain dissatisfied with the outcome. In 2024/25, the Trust re-opened 13 complaints for further investigation. This was due to complainants raising additional questions following the initial response, disagreeing with the content of the response letter, or identifying that some issues had not been addressed.

We actively encourage complainants to share any ongoing concerns so we can revisit their case and consider alternative ways to resolve the matter. Where appropriate, we also offer meetings to facilitate more in-depth, face-to-face discussions, which often help clarify issues and address outstanding questions.

Complainants are also informed of the free and confidential advice and advocacy services available through the Patient and Client Council.

## Ombudsman Investigations

Complainants who remain dissatisfied with the Trust's response and feel that further engagement would not resolve their concerns have the option to refer their complaint to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) for an independent review of the Trust's complaints handling process.

During the 2024/25 period, six complaints were referred to NIPSO for review. Of these, one was accepted for formal investigation. At the time of publication, the outcome of that investigation had not yet been received.









# Internal Audit of NIAS Complaints

## Procedure

During 2024/25, the NIAS complaints procedure was audited by the Business Services Organisation (BSO) Internal Audit team. The objective of the audit was to ensure that complaints are appropriately managed in line with Department of Health guidance. The audit provided Satisfactory Assurance, the highest level attainable, in relation to the management of complaints within NIAS.

This level of assurance attained reflects that complaints are generally handled in accordance with established procedures, with appropriate recording on the Datix system, and that records of investigations are retained. Investigations were found to address the issues raised, with evidence of learning and actions being implemented. The audit also confirmed that NIAS has effective governance and oversight arrangements in place through its assurance framework, including the Rapid Review Group, Learning Outcome Review Group, and the Safety, Quality, Patient Experience and Performance Committee, ensuring accountability and monitoring of learning outcomes from complaints.

A key finding from the audit related to complaints training, where it was noted that:

- At the time of the audit NIAS did not have visibility of how many staff have completed the mandatory complaints awareness training versus those who have not, due to the platform that hosts e-learning being updated. Access to this data is now available.
- There is a need to refresh training for staff involved in complaint investigations. Staff training is being taken forward as part of the wider implementation of the new NIPSO Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP), as outlined at the end of this report.

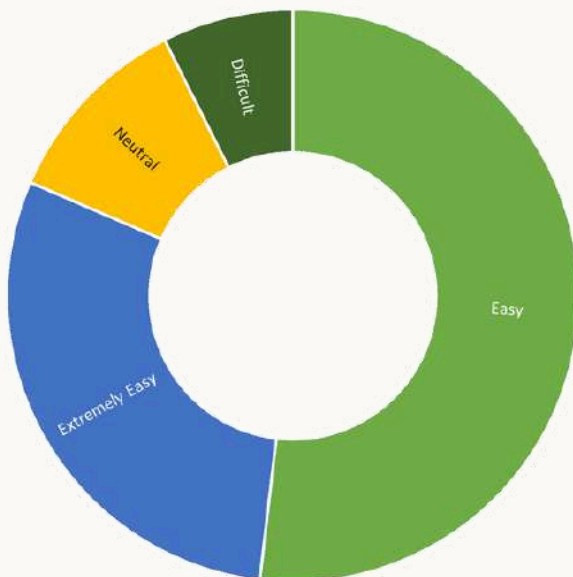


# Feedback from Service Users and Staff

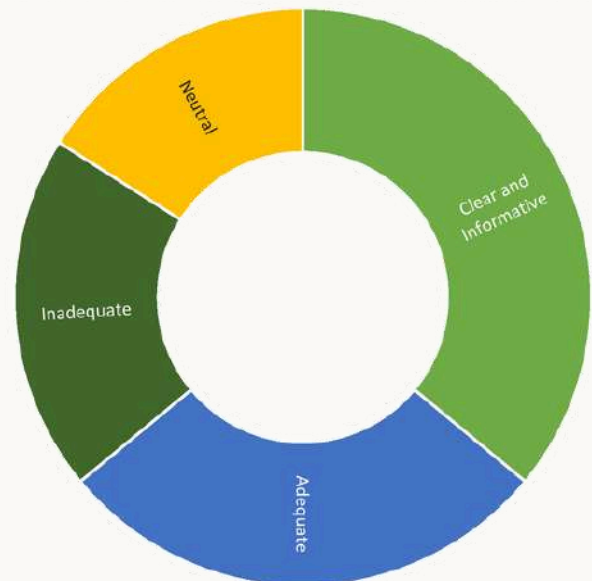
In April 2024, an online survey—developed with support from the NIAS Patient Voice Forum—was launched to gather feedback and assess the effectiveness of the Trust’s complaints process. The survey is shared with both individuals who have used the complaints procedure and staff involved in managing complaints.

Surveys are distributed via email five weeks after a complaint is closed. During the 2024/25 period, 27 responses were received. While the response rate to this year’s feedback survey was low and therefore not fully representative of our service users’ experiences, the responses received have still provided valuable insight. The key findings from the feedback we did receive are as follows:

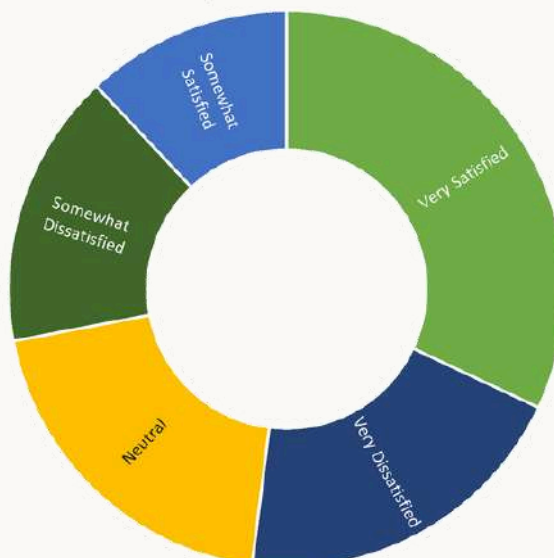
**How easy was it to submit your complaint?**



**Effectiveness of Communication**



**Overall Experience**





# What you said about Your Experience of the Complaints Process

I was very satisfied that my complaint was actioned and the contact from NIAS was excellent.

I feel the complaint could have been answered earlier.

Due to ongoing resourcing challenges, NIAS responses to complaints often cite a lack of available ambulances or delays caused by hospital handover pressures. These explanations are consistently framed as the status quo, offering little assurance that improvements are forthcoming. The responses can appear indifferent, reinforcing the perception that nothing can be done. As a result, there is a lack of public confidence in the service's ability to respond effectively in life-threatening emergencies.

Very satisfied with how the complaint was handled throughout the process.

Effective process in challenging circumstances. Very well dealt with indeed.

[Service User Feedback team member] was so helpful and thoughtful about my dad's health as it was an emergency that caused this complaint.

The members of staff handling the complaint did so professionally and with empathy and understanding. However, the outcome was disappointing overall. Have more faith in the administrative side of NIAS than the service itself going forward.

Thank you for your service as your jobs are intense but I am happy my problem was handled properly and with speed.

It takes so long for the outcome.

# Learning from Complaints

We see complaints as valuable opportunities to learn and improve the services we provide. Where appropriate, complaints are discussed with the staff involved to better understand what happened and identify areas for improvement. Staff are also supported by Divisional Training Officers and Clinical Support Officers to enhance service quality.

During 2024/25, 198 learning outcomes were identified through complaint investigations. By the end of March 2025, 146 (74%) of these had been implemented. Most of the recommendations focused on supporting staff through additional training or counselling to help prevent similar issues from happening again.

Examples of learning and support provided to staff following complaints include:

- **Communication skills:**
  - Managing difficult or confrontational situations.
  - Communicating effectively with patients' families.
  - Understanding how light-hearted comments can sometimes be misinterpreted or cause offence.
- **Handling 999 calls** in line with international, national, and regional protocols.
- **Documenting decisions** when emergency resources are dispatched outside normal guidelines.
- **Maintaining high standards of driving** when responding to emergency calls.
- **Carrying out musculoskeletal assessments** thoroughly, including the appropriate use of pain relief.
- **Completing clear and accurate patient records.**

In addition to individual staff learning, we also introduced wider service improvements, such as:

- **Within the Non-Emergency Ambulance Operations Centre:**
  - Improving how last-minute staff absences are handled to avoid missed transport for patients.
  - Strengthening communication with Health and Social Care partners and service users when transport cannot be provided or if the type of vehicle changes.
- **An Independent Ambulance Service provider:**
  - Delivered extra training to staff where gaps in knowledge were identified, particularly in how to use specific vehicle equipment.
- **Within the Emergency Operations Centre:**
  - Development of system improvements so that 999 call handlers can see real-time information on delays in the caller's area, enabling informed communication for those waiting for help.











# 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 2024/25, the Trust received **450 compliments**.

The chart below illustrates the themes captured within the compliments received.



# Compliments Received

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

## “Heartfelt appreciation”

We as a family wish to express our deepest gratitude for the incredible care and professionalism shown by NIAS personnel who responded to the call concerning our fathers passing. In our family's time of intense shock and sorrow, the presence and compassionate assistance given provided us with immense comfort. The prompt arrival alongside the empathy and sensitivity demonstrated by all went far beyond professional duty. Indeed, the respect and dignity shown to daddy made an indelible impression on our family. My daddy had great respect for NIAS having worked alongside them during many incidents within his role as a firefighter. May we take this opportunity to thank all the first responders for their unwavering dedication and remarkable service provided day in and daily to those in need. With heartfelt appreciation.”

## “Remarkable”

“I would like to thank the ambulance crew for their fast and efficient job. Their knowledge in first aid is remarkable. My neighbour had a bad fall and when they took their blood pressure, they knew it was very high and explained everything. They saved his life.”

## “Reassuring”

“On Monday I had to call 999 for an ambulance for my mum who appeared to be having a seizure.

The call handler was very reassuring, and the ambulance arrived quickly. The paramedic and Emergency Medical Technician were amazing! Both staff were very competent, confident, and reassuring. The care, support and attention mum received was second to none. An absolute credit to themselves, their jobs, and the service!

The medical emergency with mum was something I have never experienced before and was frightening but they both talked me and my dad through what was going on and what the next steps were. I honestly can't thank them enough for their service and working with mum whilst also managing both mine and dad's fears about what was happening.

There are no words to explain my gratitude for them both, they are amazing, and I can't thank them enough. NIAS is very lucky to have them both.”

## “A Credit”

“Two fantastic staff attended my call out. I had been lying on the floor with an injured back spasming for about 8 hrs. My partner let them in, and they reassured me, gave me gas and air to get me off the floor and helped me move. They then went through all the options with me, and the medications ordered by the GP for the following day.

The paramedic and Emergency Medical Technician had a great bedside manner reassuring and kind (I had been really scared and in pain) they are a credit to their job. Thank you both!”





# Plans for 2025/26

Looking ahead, the Service User Feedback Team has several key priorities aimed at improving how we handle complaints and enhance service user experience:

- **Implementing a new complaints handling procedure:**

A new Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP), developed by the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO), was published on 1 July 2025. In line with NIPSO's implementation timeline, NIAS will adopt and embed this new approach by 1 January 2026.

This work will include:

- Developing our own complaints procedure in line with NIPSO's guidance.
- Creating online training for all staff to raise awareness of the new procedure and their responsibilities.
- Providing specialised training for staff who investigate complaints that have been escalated to Stage 2 of the process.
- Reviewing how people can raise a complaint, with a focus on making the process more accessible and inclusive.
- Building a staff resource hub with practical tools and guidance to help staff deliver a fair, timely, and consistent complaints service.

- **Improved complaint response times:**

We remain committed to responding to complaints more promptly. As part of the work to implement the new MCHP from NIPSO, we are reviewing our current processes to identify ways to improve efficiency while continuing to provide a thorough and high-quality service.

These changes are part of our ongoing commitment to listening, learning, and improving the care and services we provide.