

## **. BACKGROUND**

The Southern Health and Social Services Council has a statutory remit to represent the views and opinions of consumers of health and social services in the Southern Board's area. One of the Council's main activities is to offer support and guidance to patients or members of the public who want to complain about any part of health and social services. It also carries out research into how patients view the services they receive.

As part of its 1999 - 2000 annual work programme, the Council proposed conducting a survey of people who had contacted the Council for support or guidance on how to make a complaint.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

A questionnaire was developed which examined issues such as how complainants were aware of the Council, effectiveness of the advice they received, how they were treated and the outcome of their complaint. This was distributed by post to 100 people who had contacted the Complaints Officer between March 1999 and June 2000. A reminder letter was posted to non-respondents 3 weeks after the initial questionnaire was distributed.

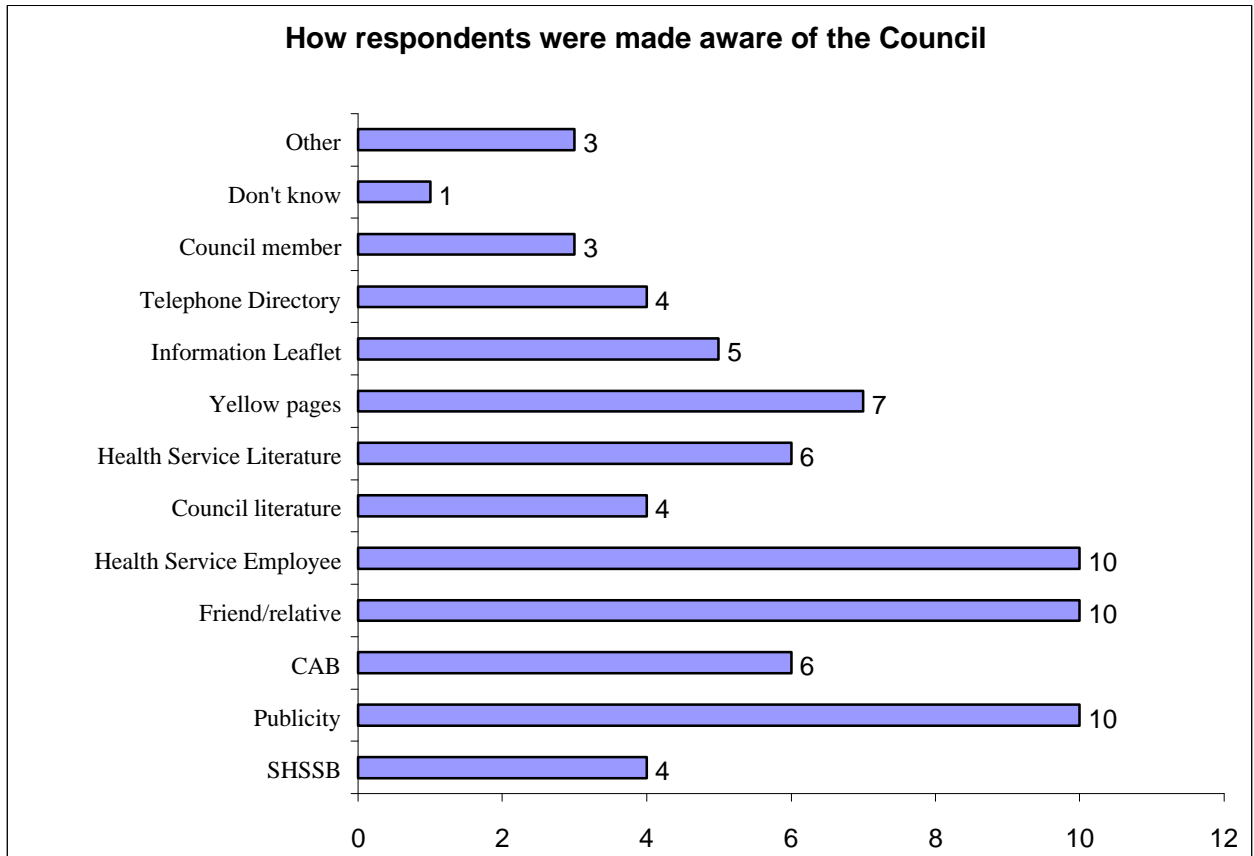
The questionnaires were completed anonymously.

## **3. RESULTS**

Fifty-one complainants returned completed questionnaires. Seventeen respondents indicated they had a disability or special needs.

### **Awareness of Council**

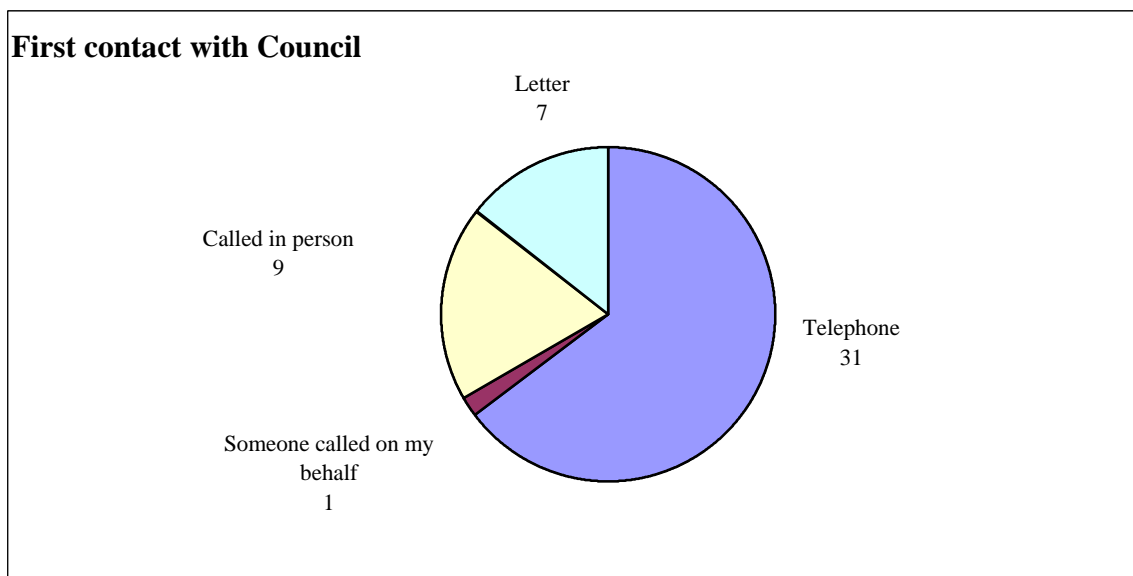
The most common means through which the respondents became aware of the Council was through friends/relatives (10) publicity (10) and health service employees (10). Other responses included yellow pages (7), health service literature (6), Citizen's Advice Bureau (6), information leaflets (5), Council literature (4) and Council members (3).



\* Figures add up to more than 51 because some respondents were made aware of the Council by more than one means.

### First contact

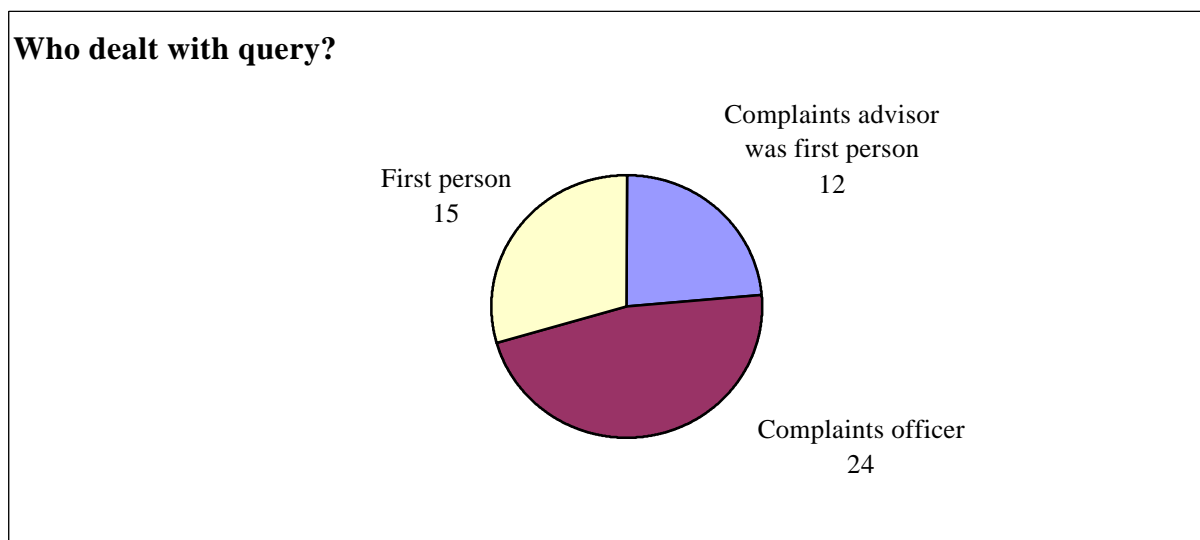
Most of the respondents (31) said their first contact with the Council was by telephone, 9



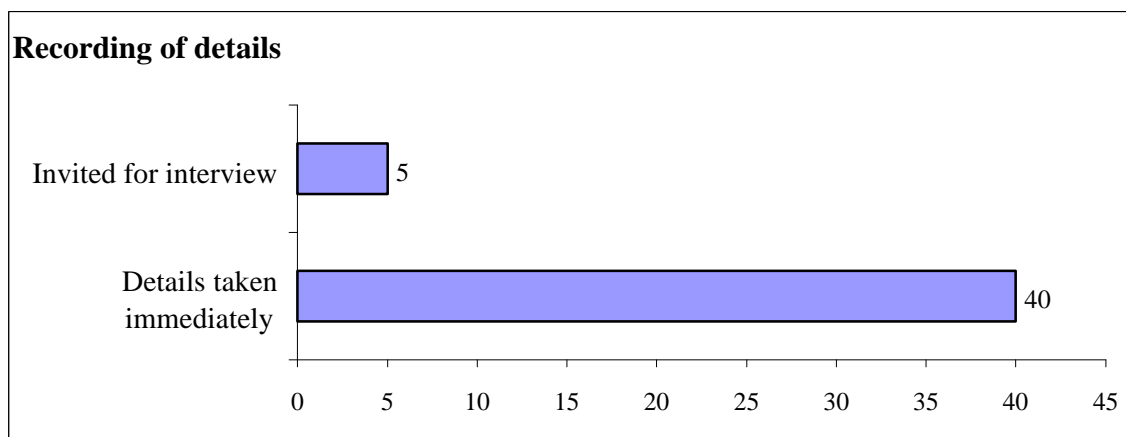
called in person, 7 sent a letter and one person said some one called on their behalf.

\*3 respondents gave no response.

Fifteen respondents said their query was dealt with by the first person they had contact with, almost half (24) were referred to the complaints officer and 12 said the complaints officer was the first person they had contact with.



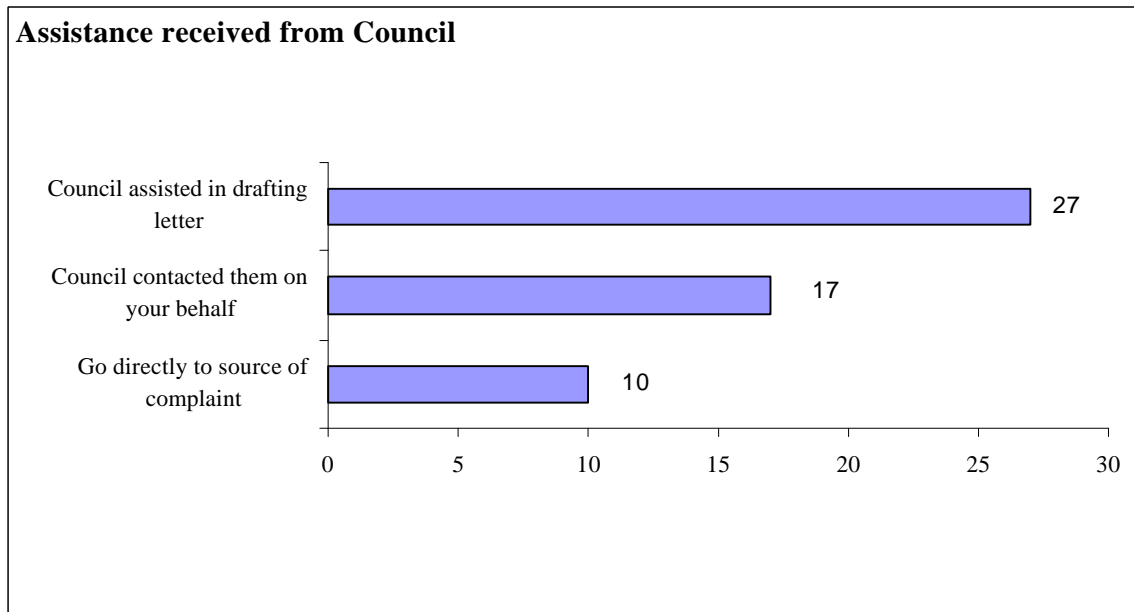
The majority of the respondents said their details were taken immediately (n = 40), while 5 respondents were invited for an interview.



\* Six respondents gave no response.

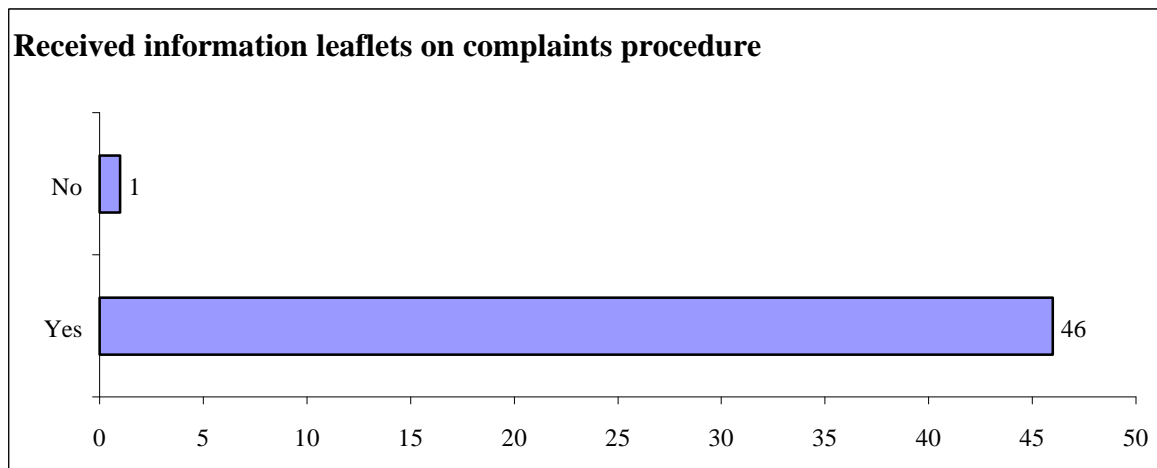
### **Advice**

With regard to the help provided by the Council, over half (27), received assistance in drafting a letter to the source of the complaint. In 17 cases, the Council contacted the source of the complaint on behalf of the respondent and 10 respondents were advised by the Council to go directly to the source of the complaint.



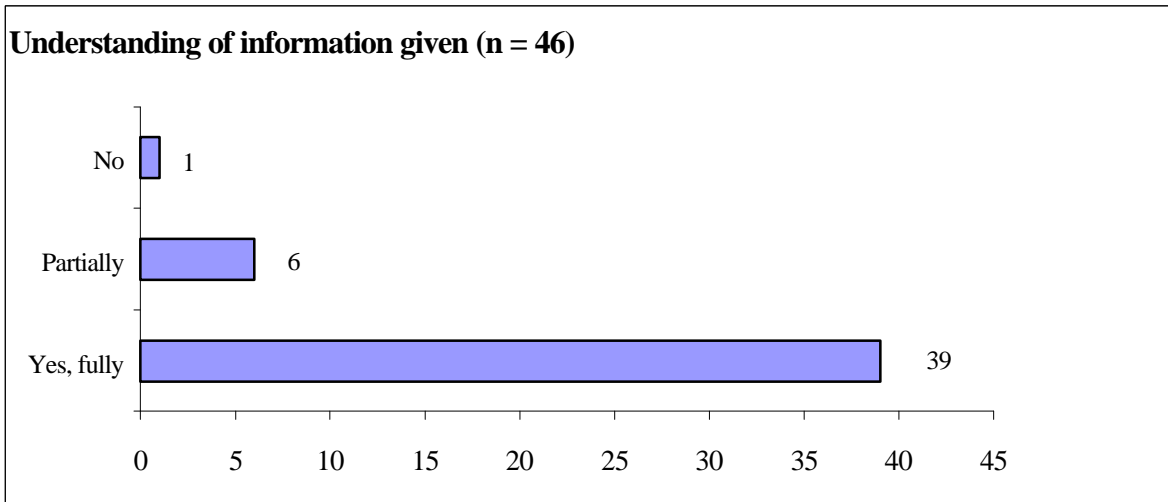
\* Some received more than 1 type of assistance.

The vast majority of respondents (46) said they received written information leaflets on the complaints procedure. One respondent did not.

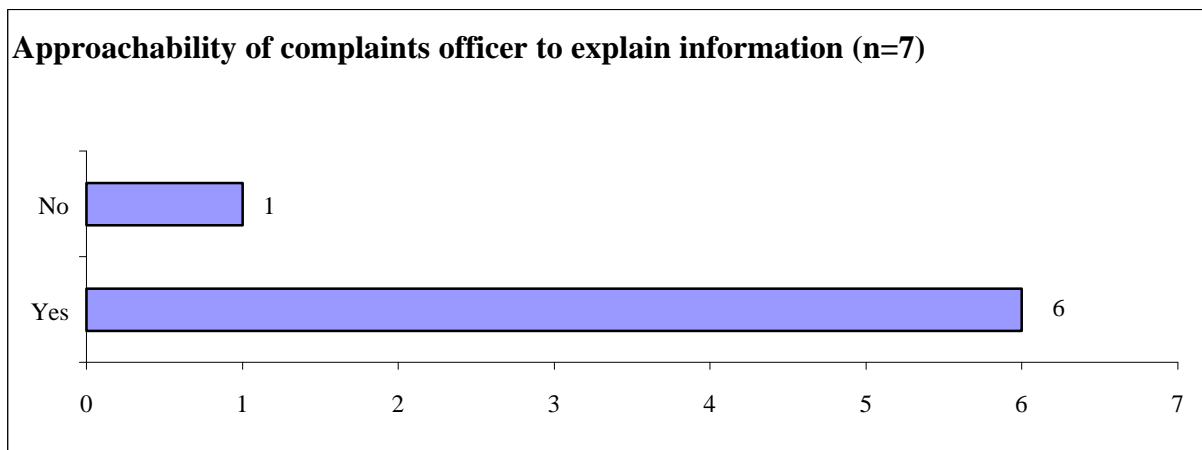


\*4 respondents gave no response to this question.

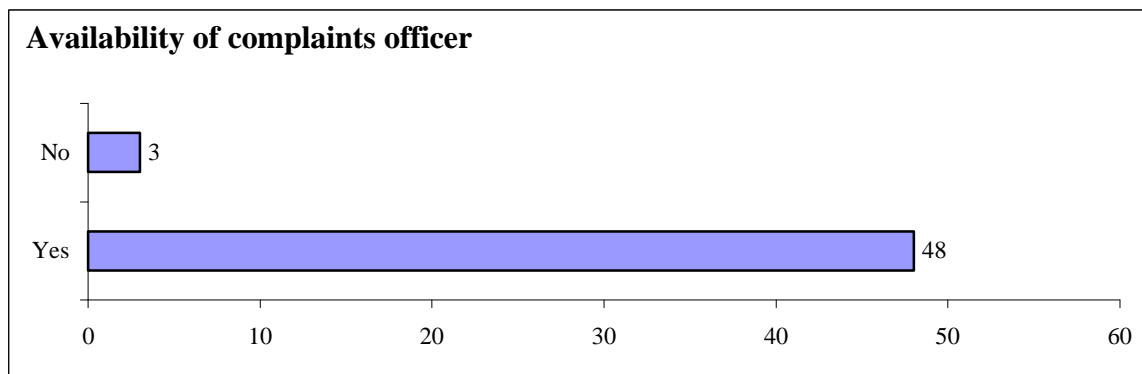
The majority of respondents fully understood the information they were given (n = 39). Six respondents partially understood the information and 1 respondent did not understand it.



Of those who didn't or only partially understood the information in the complaints procedure leaflets, 6 felt they could ask the complaints officer to explain it. One respondent felt they could not approach the complaints officer about this.



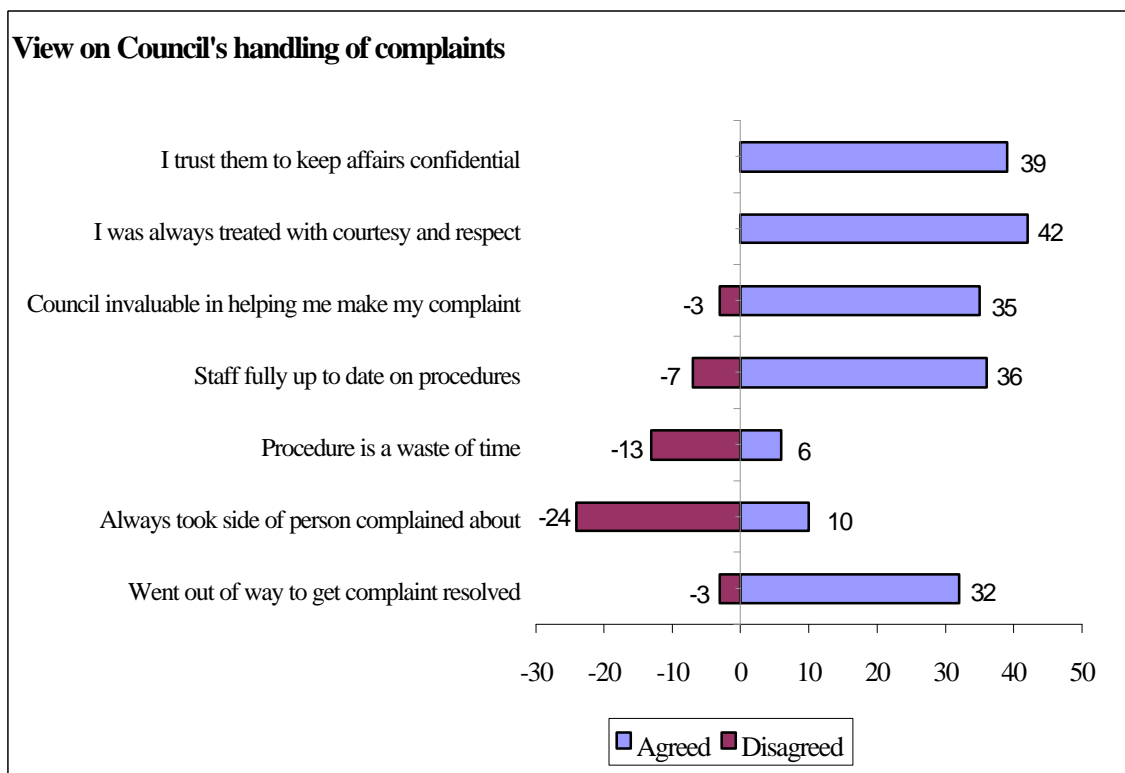
The vast majority felt they could contact the complaints officer at any time. Three respondents said they felt they could not.



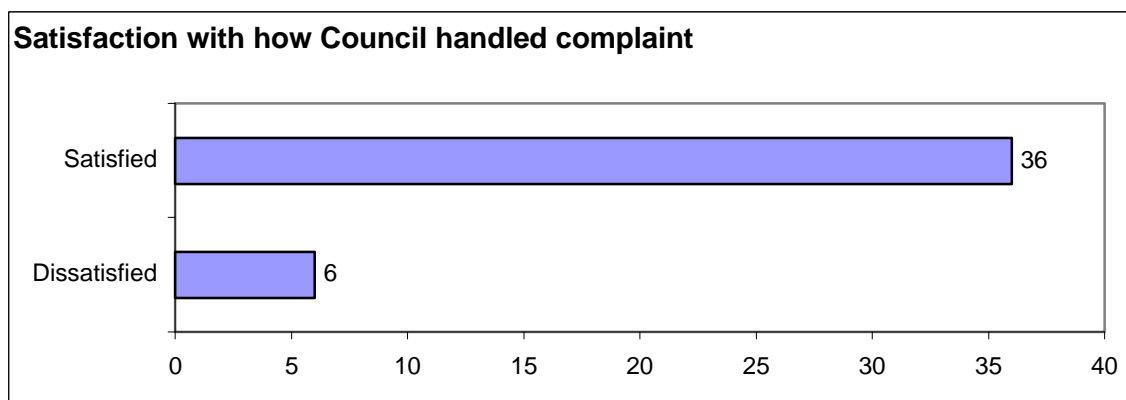
### **Performance**

Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a number of statements relating to the way in which the Council handled their complaint. For the purposes of analysis, strongly agreed and agreed have been merged together, as have strongly disagreed and disagreed.

Assistance provided by the Council in making the complaint was considered highly important by many respondents. The majority of the respondents said the Council went out of its way to get the complaint resolved (32), that it was invaluable in helping the respondent make the complaint (35) and that staff were fully up to date on procedures (36). The majority of respondents also said that they were always treated with courtesy and respect (42) and that the Council could be trusted to keep their affairs confidential (39). No respondents disagreed in either case. However, 10 respondents agreed that the Council always took the side of the person being complained about and 6 thought the complaints procedure was a waste of time.



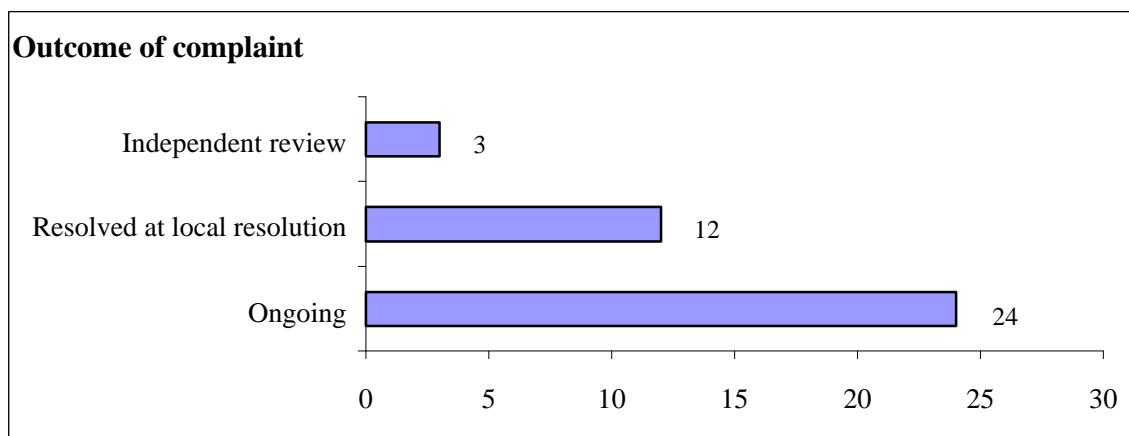
Thirty-six respondents were satisfied with the way the Council handled their complaint. Six respondents said they were dissatisfied.



\* 9 respondents gave no response.

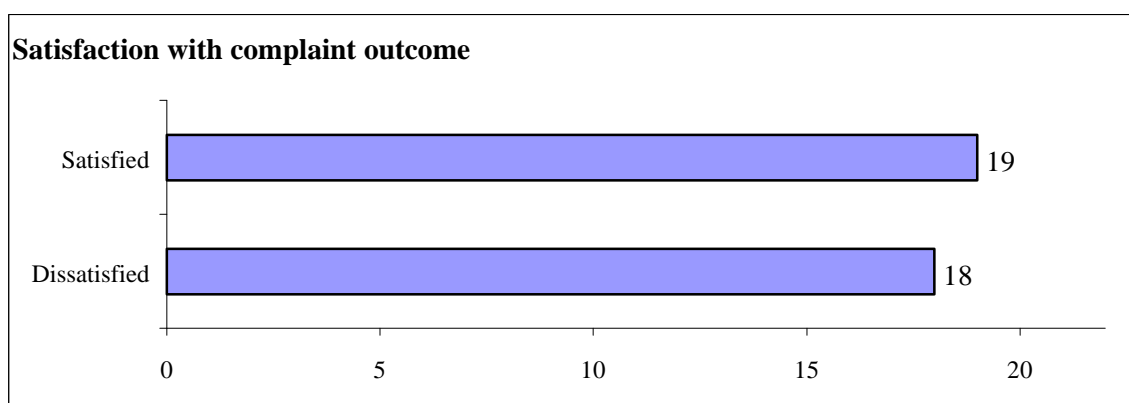
### Outcome of complaints procedure

At the time the respondents completed the questionnaire, almost half (24) were involved in ongoing complaints procedures, 12 said their complaints had been resolved at local resolution and 3 complaints had gone to an independent review.



\* 12 respondents gave no response.

Just over a third (19) were satisfied with the outcome of the complaint and 18 were dissatisfied. Eight respondents were still awaiting an outcome.



\* 6 respondents gave no response.

### **Improvements**

Respondents were asked for their suggestions as to how the Council could improve the way it handles complaints. Most respondents commented that the Council handled their complaint satisfactorily and to the best of its ability.

*" The Council to my knowledge did handle my complaint with great understanding."*

*".....the Council could not have been more helpful."*



*"I found the service to be first class at all times."*

*"In my position I am satisfied."*

*"In my experience with the Council, they were very helpful. I don't think they need any improvement."*

*"The Council advisor in our complaint has given us a lot of her time and more. We have never felt that we could not talk to her openly and found her responses honestly answered."*

*"I am very satisfied with the help I received in making my complaint. This help was received from the complaints officer who was excellent in every way. Very considerate and understanding."*

*"I would like to say that your complaints officer is extremely efficient and most courteous."*

*"My complaint was dealt with satisfactorily."*

Some respondents said that the difficulties they experienced were due to the actual NHS complaints procedure. The difficulties highlighted included the length and complexity of the process, not being able to pursue the issue through the courts and dissatisfaction with the outcome.

*"My dispute is ongoing for 3 months, and apart from an initial reply acknowledging my letter, I have not had a response to my query."*

*"The complaints procedure is a time consuming, emotionally fraught episode."*

*"Less complicated paperwork to fill in."*

*"The lady I spoke to was a great help, but she told me you cannot get involved in court which I think is a great pity."*

*"I am very upset that an independent review was not held. I do not think that my case was looked at thoroughly as the convenor (who has since apologised) said that I had declined meeting with doctors when I had met with them. I still feel as if no-one has really investigated this properly."*

Other respondents indicated that the difficulties they experienced were due to how the organisation/individual being complained about handled their complaint.

*"Ensure that the body that the complaint is made against settles the dispute more quickly."*

*"Always refused a proper investigation and ignored. Treated as if 'here she comes again complaining'."*

Respondents were dissatisfied with how Doctors and Trusts dealt with their complaint.

*"After it left the offices and went to different bodies, ie. Doctors in question, I found you were on a losing battle with them."*

*"You can never win with Doctors, as they stick together - don't really admit a mistake but this mistake is in the grave."*

*"The Council handles things fine, it is the Board of Trusts that needs improving."*

*"At the end, the public have no chance to get satisfaction out of any large agency eg. DHSS, H & SS or SHSS. They are answerable to nobody. The letter I eventually got from ...was insulting and demeaning. I felt belittled by tone and content."*

*"The complaints resolution process within my local H & SS trust is not set at a sufficiently high standard. In my case, this was evidenced by inadequate investigation, lacking any independent input. There was no apparent accountability demonstrated by the Trust's complaints person in response to discrepancies identified at a resolution meeting."*

Some respondents questioned the independence of the Council.

*"By not taking the part of the fat cats."*

*"Be impartial: don't give impression of working for Doctor."*

There was a perception among some that as the Council was part of the NHS, they may take the side of the person or organisation being complained about.

*"I do feel that seeing as this is a Health Service Council, the advisors feel for the person being complained about and tend to stick up for the trust on certain matters."*

*"Realise it is genuine and stop taking sides and covering up."*

*"Complaints are dealt with the NHS and no way will they run down their own people."*

Some respondents thought that the Council could improve the way it handles complaints by taking a more pro-active role.

*"Be more pro-active - eg. visit complainants / assess situation independently / in situ."*

*"Maybe by making a pro-active follow up by a given date, to ensure that the complaints advisor is doing what she said she would, and to check that the complaint has had an outcome"*

Some of the suggestions would involve increasing the powers of the Council to investigate complaints.

*"Give the Council power over Doctor's behaviour."*

*"To guard the service user's interests, particularly where trust in the HSST has broken down, it is imperative that the Council can facilitate a fast track to Independent*

*Review....the Council should immediately be able to access the Independent Review process on behalf of the complainant."*

Some respondents thought that the Council's services could be improved if more people were aware of their role and function and thought that greater use of publicity should be made.

*"Handle complaints by publicity."*

*"I am very satisfied but perhaps a little more advertisement could be used."*

*"A positive and reassuring message transmitting the Council's presence could be put in place using IT and the various visual monitors found in waiting areas."*

*"Letting every patient know who the complaints advisor is in the area and who in the patient's local practice is responsible for complaints."*

One person suggested that the Council should produce a regular newsletter which could be made available in waiting areas.

*"The Council might consider producing a newsletter on a regular basis. This could publicise the Council's services on behalf of the service users."*

Other suggestions included the provision of local offices, lobbying on particular issues and follow-up after the complaint has been resolved.

*"Open an office in Newry."*

*"The Council needs to be involved in strenuously lobbying: for compulsory independent monitoring of all individual complaints; to ensure that local resolution meetings are independently chaired and that accurate neutral processes of minute taking are in place; and investigation of the complaint should not be the responsibility of the senior manager of the department concerned."*

*"Please keep up the pressure for more funding for hospital care, especially for the old as they can't speak for themselves."*

#### **4. KEY POINTS**

Overall, the vast majority of respondents were satisfied with the Council's performance in assisting them to pursue a complaint under the NHS Complaints Procedure. Many expressed an appreciation of the efforts made by the Council and the help and assistance offered. Most thought it had done all within its power to assist.

The vast majority of respondents had received written information on the complaints procedure and most fully understood the information. Of those who didn't, most felt they could ask the complaints officer to explain it. The most common types of assistance provided by the Council was; drafting letters and contacting the individuals or organisations being complained about.

The majority of respondents said they were always treated with courtesy and respect and they trusted the Council to keep their affairs confidential. However 10 respondents thought that the Council took the side of the person being complained about.

Some dissatisfaction was expressed by a number of respondents and some had experienced problems along the way. However for the most part, these tended not to have been related to the Council's performance in assisting them with their complaint, rather the source of the problems included the complexity of the complaints process and how the health and social service providers being complained about handled the complaint.

Respondents made numerous suggestions as to how the services of the Council could be improved. Some of the suggestions for improvement related to increasing awareness of the services provided by the Council. Others suggested that the Council should have a presence in areas outside of Lurgan and should take a more proactive role.

#### **Action points**

- The Council will distribute posters and leaflets which outline the Council's role in relation to complaints to health and social services premises and other relevant premises.
- ◆ The Council follow up the distribution of these leaflets and posters to find out whether they are displayed.

- ◆ The Council will develop a website and include information and advice as to how to make a complaint under the NHS Complaints Procedure.
- ◆ The Council will develop links with voluntary groups outside of Lurgan with the aim of making the Council's services more locally accessible. One way in which this might be done is to visit a voluntary organisation one half day a month to be available to advise on complaints and to distribute literature.
- ◆ The Council will revise its leaflet on the complaints procedure to ensure that all information can be easily understood and that complainants are made aware that they can contact the complaints officer for further explanations.
- ◆ The Council will follow-up those individuals who contacted the Council once only for advice, one month after the initial contact to inquire whether they require further assistance.