



Department
for Education

Complaints about schools: Customer Satisfaction Survey 2013

Research Report

February 2014

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Background

A survey was undertaken to explore customer satisfaction among complainants who contacted the department between August 2012 and July 2013, the first year in which the new School Complaint unit was operational. In its first year of operation the department received c1,500 complaints about schools. Of these 284 were accepted for further more detailed consideration, while the remainder were referred back to the local school complaints process.

A short questionnaire was designed for complainants referred back to the local school complaints process, henceforth referred to as 'first stage' respondents. A long questionnaire was designed for complainants whose complaint was considered by the SCU or other divisions, henceforth referred to as 'full complaint' respondents.

An opt-out exercise was undertaken by the department in September 2013 among the target population of complainants. As a result of this exercise, 1,485 service users detailed were passed to BMG Research for the study.

The survey was undertaken between 3rd October and 1st November 2013 (noting that this is potentially several months since the service experience for some respondents). All 1,485 were sent a questionnaire by e-mail or post, and 429 returned a completed questionnaire. This is a response rate of 29% overall, increasing to 33% among full complaint respondents. The achieved sample comprises 79% first stage respondents and 17% full complaint respondents¹. This is similar to the target population: The sample database received by BMG, after opt-outs comprised of 83% first stage respondents and 14% full complaint respondents. The slightly larger proportion of full complaint respondents in the achieved sample is likely to result from their increased level of contact with the department which makes them more engaged and likely to fill out a questionnaire.

This report sets out conclusions and recommendations which aim to provide a basis for the department to initiate ongoing improvements in service and assess impact. Other studies were reviewed for benchmarking² but not found to be comparable due to question wording and method. The audience also differs from most customer satisfaction research due to the strength of feeling on the topics being complained about. Most complainants to the department are parents; their complaint concerns treatment of their child(en), and involves sensitive issues including bullying, Special Educational Needs, and perceived school misconduct. Further, where the department refers the complainant back to the school, the respondent often considers that the department has not provided them with a service, and so gathering feed-back on aspects of service can be problematic.

¹ The sample achieved included 4% cases considered by EFA where outcome data was not available, from a target sample where 3% of cases came into this category, These cases are not included in the analysis.

² Notably the Ombudsman's report: *Responsible and Accountable? The Ombudsman's review of complaint handling by government departments and public organisations 2011-12*

Summary of Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis

Key Drivers of Satisfaction

The multi-variate approaches used (decision-tree and random forest models) are described fully in a technical appendix which is available on request. The analysis indicates that across all respondents who completed a survey, and among the variables common to both questionnaires, the strongest predictor of satisfaction is **ease of being able to make contact** (Q4_2), whereby those who rate this most highly have higher overall levels of satisfaction.

Conducting this analysis among full complaint respondents specifically, the strongest influence on satisfaction is **confidence in the complaint being taken seriously** (Q14_7), followed by **satisfaction with the time taken to reach an outcome** (Q10_2).

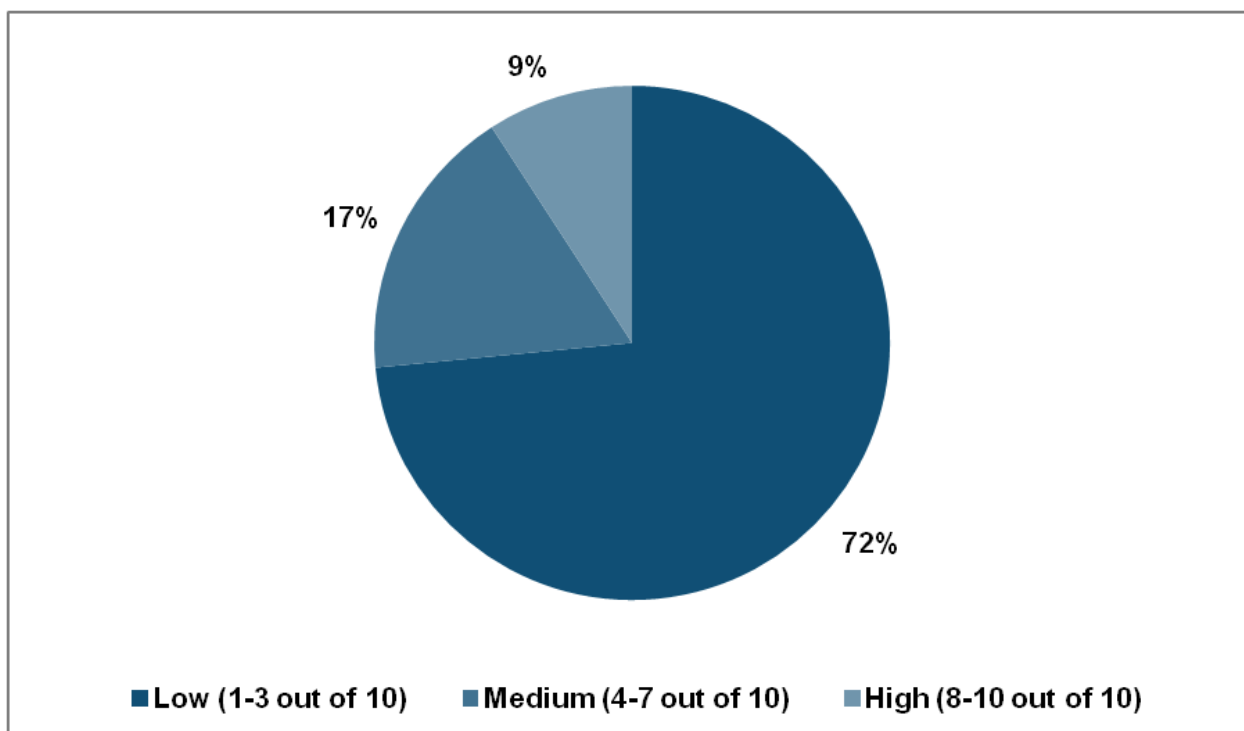
Therefore, significant improvements in satisfaction are likely to be made through the department focussing on increasing ease of making contact across all service users, increasing confidence in being taken seriously and increasing satisfaction with the time it takes to reach a final outcome among those whose complaint is considered by the department.

Satisfaction Levels

Rating their satisfaction with the overall service provided by the department on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is very dissatisfied and 10 very satisfied, the overall mean rating was 2.6. Again this was similar among first stage (2.6) and full complaint respondents (2.8). 72% were dissatisfied overall (rating between 1 and 3 out of 10), 9% were satisfied (rating between 8 and 10 out of 10) and 17% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (rating between 4 and 7 out of 10).

While aspects of service are highlighted by respondents as requiring improvement, it should be noted that satisfaction with complaint outcome may be a factor, and 73% of full complaint respondents were dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint. Verbatim responses provided through the survey also suggest that respondents are not able to distinguish their satisfaction with the service from their views about the scope of the department's powers e.g. there are mentions of being 'passed back' or that the department 'can't do anything for me'. These factors should be borne in mind when interpreting results on satisfaction and advocacy.

Figure 1: Satisfaction with the overall service provided by the department (all respondents)



Sample base: All respondents (429)

All respondents were asked how the department could make them more satisfied with the service for making complaints about a school. Feedback highlights a strong demand for more communications from the service. As summarised in Figure 2 the most common response was for more contact/feedback or better levels of communication (17%), following by taking complaints more seriously or not ignoring them (13%), and acting on or addressing complaints (11%). Other suggestions include greater impartiality (8%), a speedier process, more clarity on what can and cannot be achieved through the process, and more thorough investigation of complaints (each 7%).

Comments here were similar among first stage and full complaint respondents.

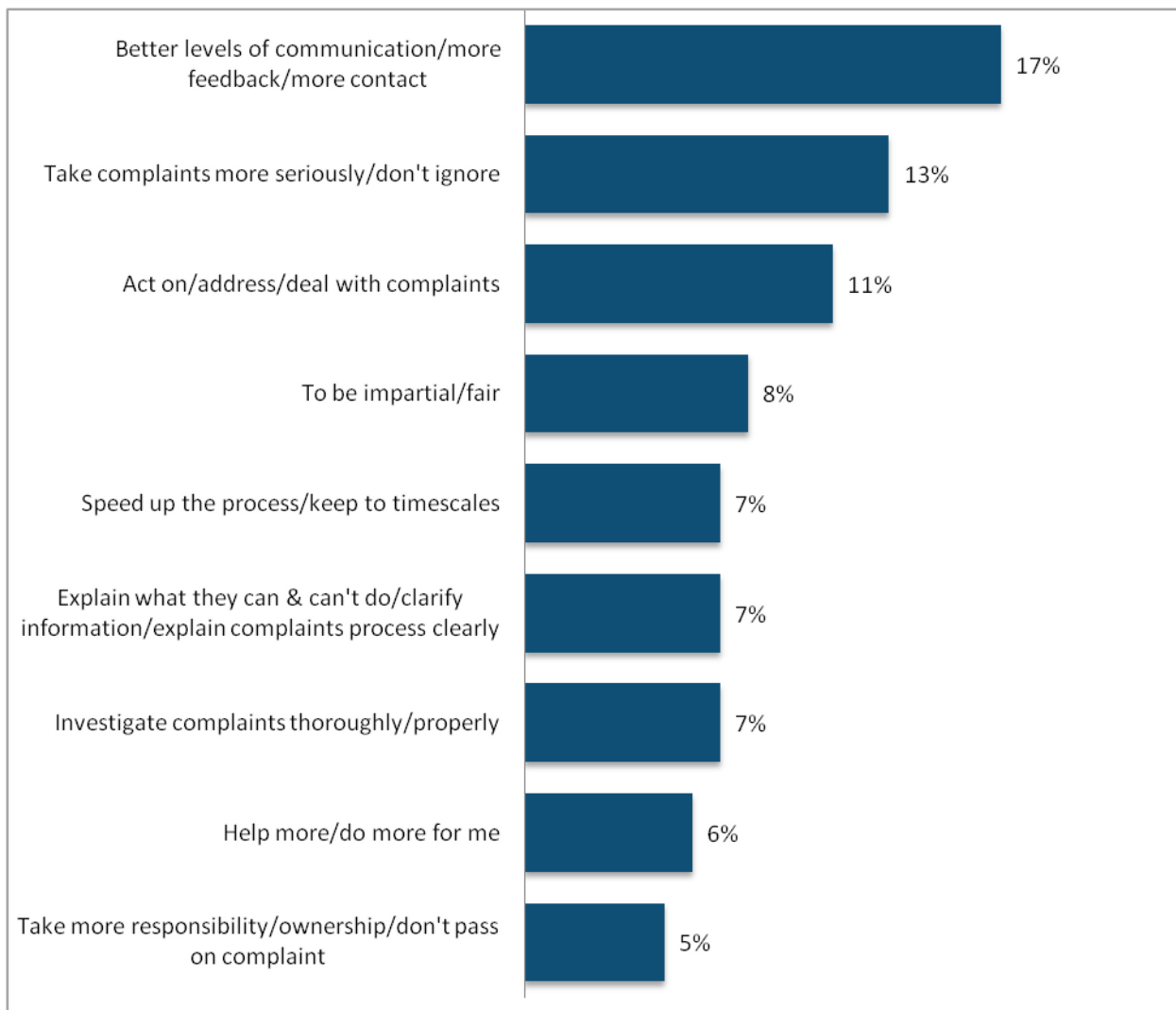
Full complaint respondents expressed some satisfaction with the case manager's use of appropriate communication formats, 21% rating this as 8-10 out of 10 in terms of satisfaction. There was also an increased level of satisfaction with having the same case manager throughout or a well-managed transition if there was a change of case manager, with 21% again rating this 8-10 out of 10 in terms of satisfaction.

Full complaint respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the communications they received from their case manager³ across seven further aspects: Timeliness, transparency, accurate reflection of the complaint, clarity, politeness, professionalism, and tone. In each case they also rated the importance of this aspect. Satisfaction ratings were higher for clarity, tone, politeness and professionalism, but the factors which were

³ Staff member allocated to a complainant where the complaint is being considered by the respondent.

more important to complainants (accurate reflection of the complaint, transparency and timeliness) were less well-rated. An improvement in these variables, alongside a focus on keeping the complainant informed, would be likely to generate much higher satisfaction among those who are allocated a case manager.

Figure 2: Views on how the department can increase satisfaction (all respondents)



Sample base: All respondents (429). Note: Responses were collected on an unprompted basis, and thematically coded, into one or more codes, from verbatim responses. The chart includes responses mentioned by 4% or more respondents.

10% gave no comment on what could be improved (increasing from 6% of dissatisfied respondents to 16% of neutral respondents and 43% of satisfied respondents).

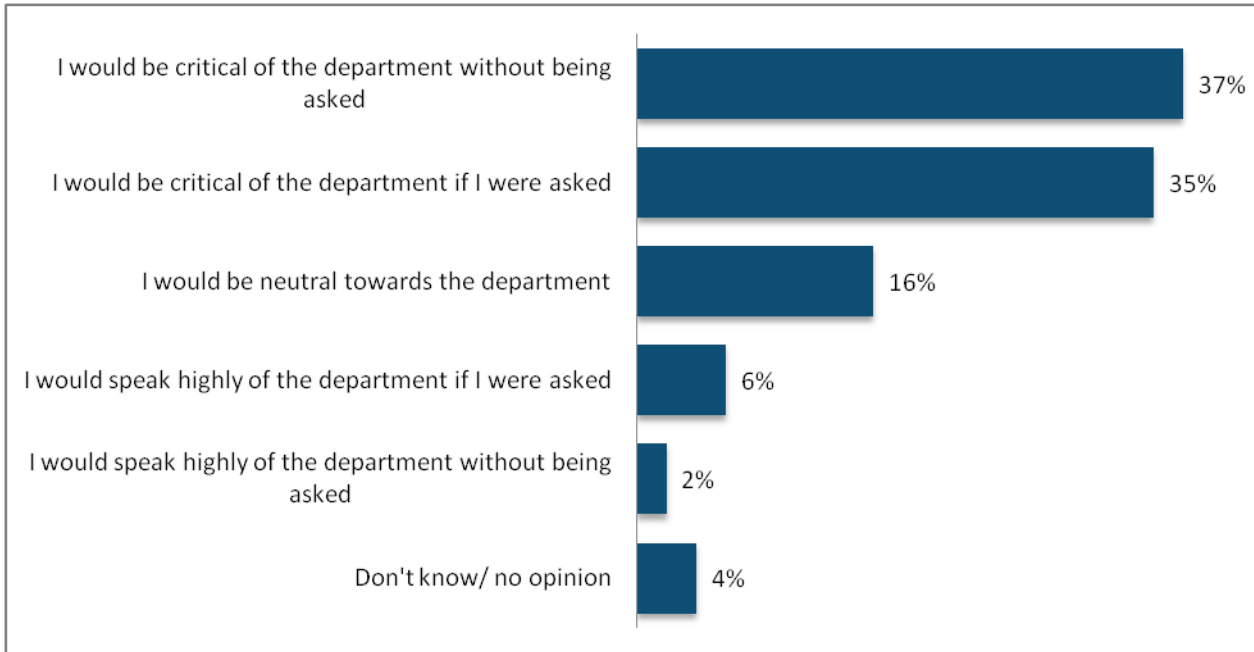
Willingness to advocate the service to others

To explore advocacy of the service, respondents were asked how they would speak to other people about the department and how it handles school complaints. As shown, 72% would be critical (37% without being asked, 35% if they were asked). 16% would be

neutral while 8% would speak highly about the department and how it handles school complaints (6% if they were asked and 2% without being asked).

4% were unsure or had no opinion here.

Figure 3: Advocacy of the service (all respondents)



Sample base: All respondents (429)

Comparing complainant types, first stage respondents appear marginally more positive in terms of advocacy: 9% state that they would speak highly of the department either with or without being asked, compared to 4% of full stage respondents. However, these differences are not statistically significant, and contribute to the general picture of a sample with largely similar views irrespective of the type and level of contact with the service. Overall, 72% of first stage respondents and 75% of full complaint respondents would be critical of the department and how it handles school complaints and therefore there is an opportunity to improve advocacy from both main audience segments before the next wave of the survey.

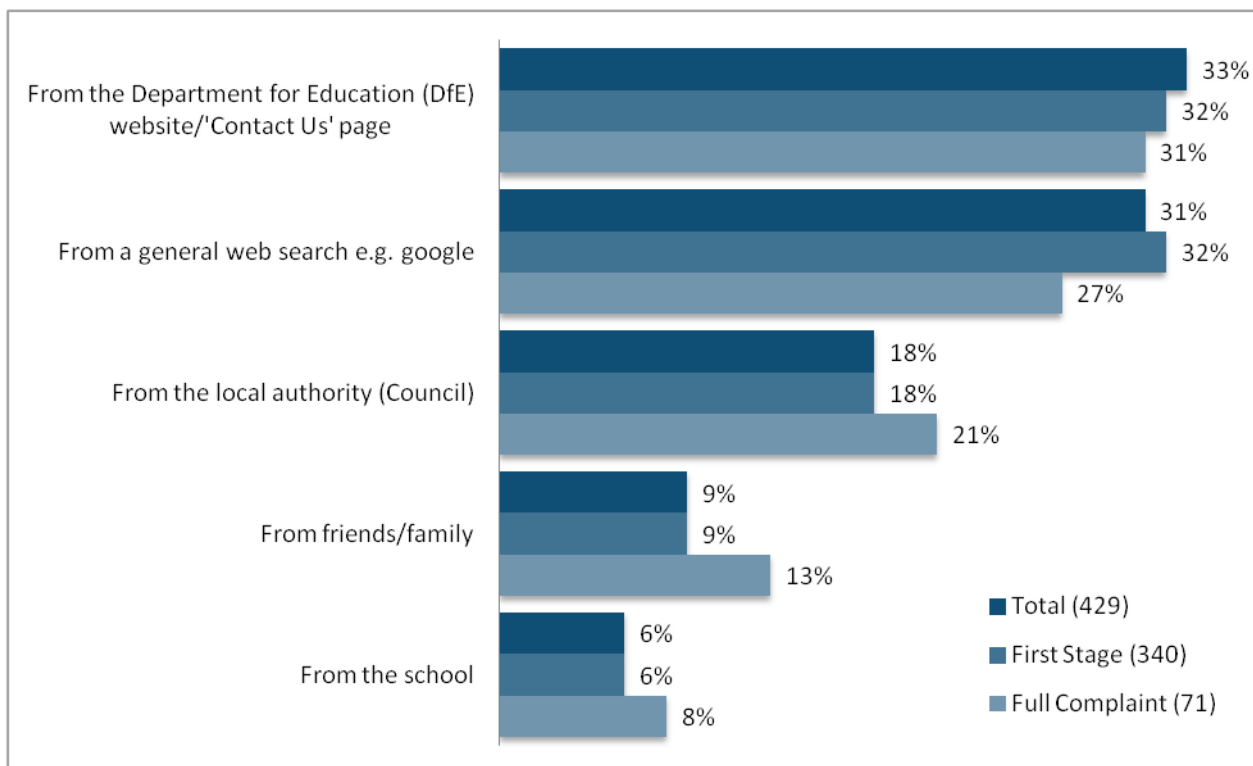
Making Contact

For 87% of respondents, this was their first complaint (87% of first stage and 86% of full complaints). The remainder divided fairly equally between those who had made one previous complaint (5%), and those who had made two or more previous complaints (6%). 2% could not recall. This question related to separate complaints, not contact about the same one.

The largest proportion of respondents found out about how to make a complaint to the department about a school from the department’s website or contact us page (33%) and from general web searches (31%). Third most likely was from the local authority (18%).

As shown in Figure 4, these findings were similar among first stage and full complaint respondents.

Figure 4: How first found out about how to make a complaint (all respondents compared by complainant type)

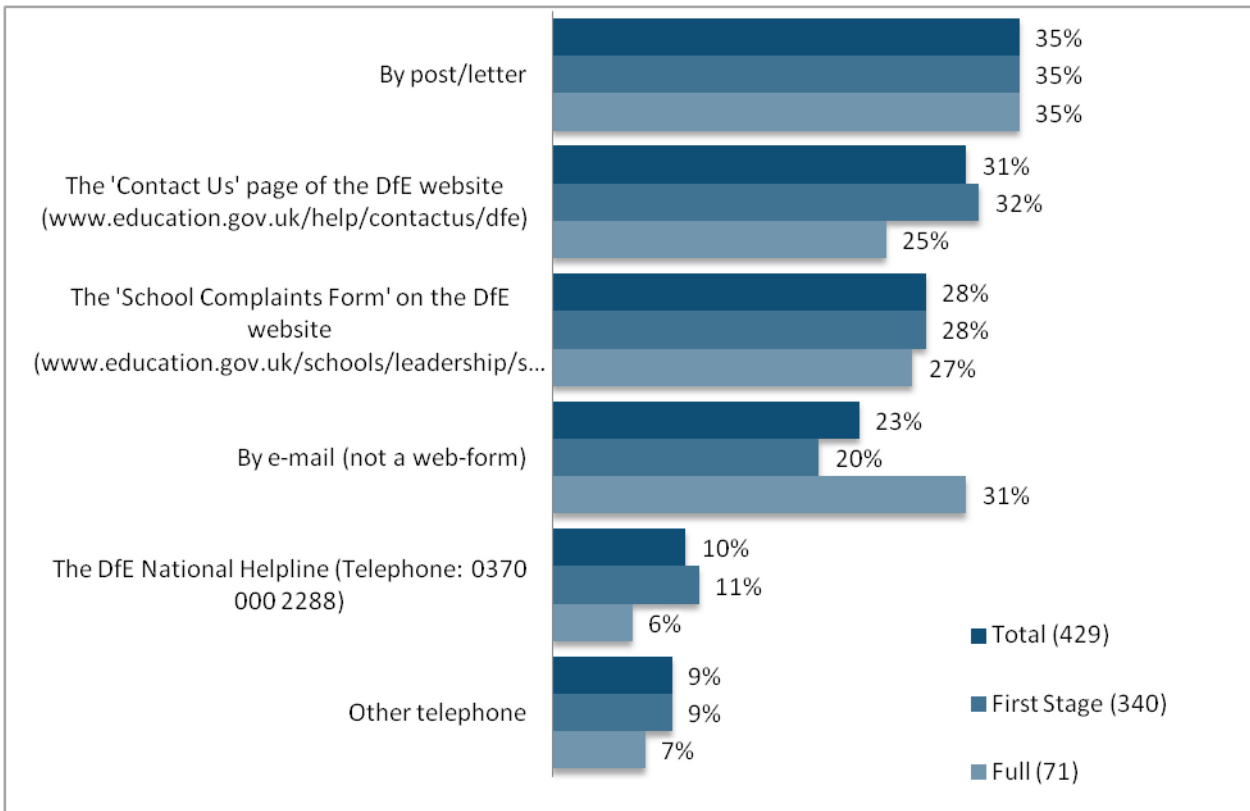


Sample bases: Shown in brackets.

The chart includes responses mentioned by 4% or more respondents. Mentions under 4% include Citizens’ Advice/other advice centre (3%). It is common for complainants to use multiple channels to make their complaint to the department.

As many as 35% contacted the department by post, but online channels were also very widely used, with 31% contacting the department via the ‘Contact Us’ page of the website, 28% via the School Complaints form on the website, and 23% via other email communication (potentially mis-remembering their contact via the web-form, although this percentage increasing among EFA cases to 31%, and may reflect use of email to the EFA). 10% said that they used the National helpline and 9% other phone communication.

Figure 5: Channel(s) used to make the complaint (all respondents compared by complainant type)



Sample bases: Shown in brackets. The chart includes responses mentioned by 4% or more respondents.

The channel by which a respondent contacted the department appears to have some influence on satisfaction, although this is very nuanced and there is no clear pattern of statistical significance.

Key Driver analysis suggests that across the full base, other variables are stronger influences on satisfaction than the channel used to access the service. Indeed, overall service satisfaction levels are not different between postal and online complainants, and throughout the survey responses generally reflect similar views irrespective of the contact channel used. However, there is some evidence that full complaint respondents who specifically use the online contact us/school complaints forms are more likely to be satisfied. This may reflect the fact that guidance about the service is to be found online. Indeed those who contacted the department by post were more likely to say unprompted that the service should provide more explanation of what can and cannot be achieved through the process (11%) than those who contacted the department online (5%).

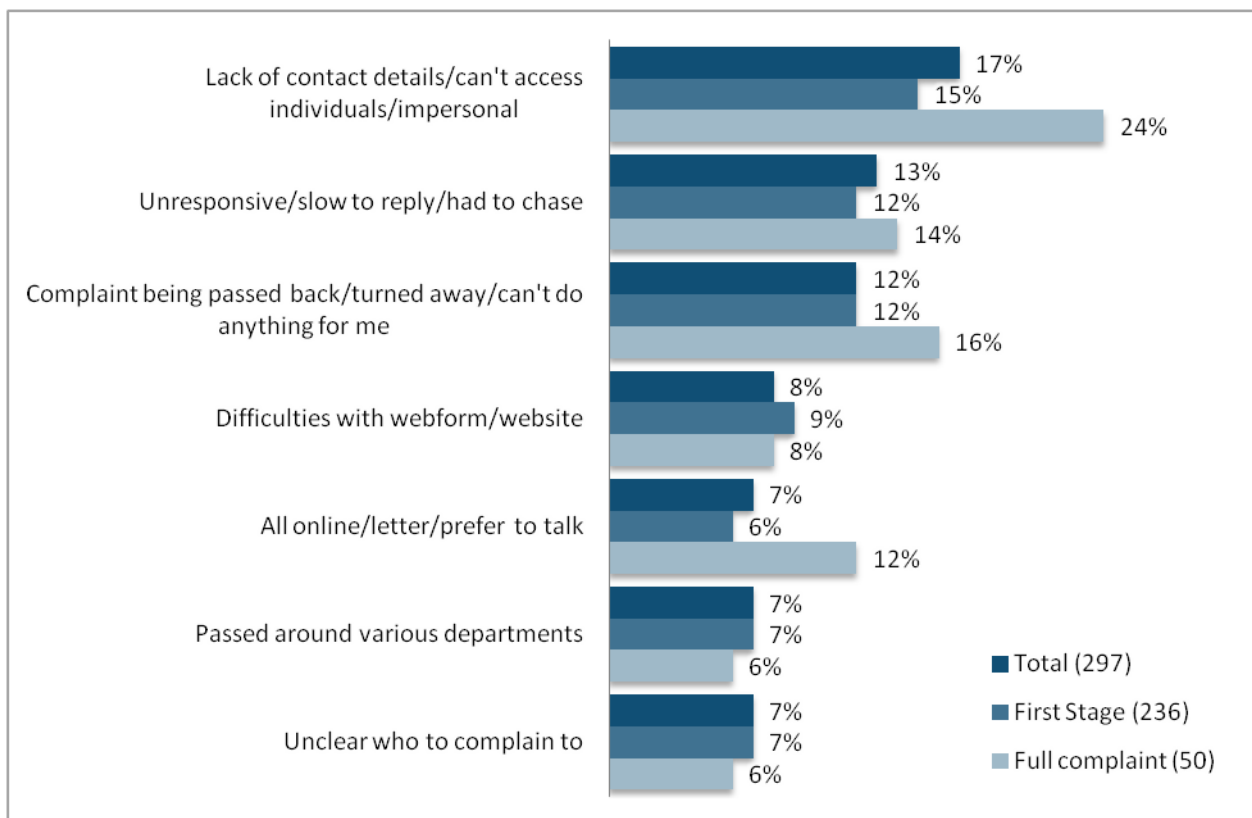
On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is very difficult and 10 is very easy, the mean (average) rating for ease of finding information on how to make a school complaint was 4.5 overall. The mean rating was the same among both first stage and full complaint respondents (4.5). Overall, 21% considered this easy, 43% difficult and 34% neither easy nor difficult.

On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is very difficult and 10 is very easy, the mean rating for ease of making contact with the department was 4.8 overall. The rating was not significantly different among first stage (4.9) and full complaint respondents (4.6). Overall,

29% considered it easy to make contact with the department, 43% difficult and 27% neither easy nor difficult.

Where respondents found making contact difficult, the most common reasons related to 'lack of contact details or not being able to access individuals/it being 'impersonal' (17%), followed by the service being unresponsive/slow to reply/had to chase (13%) and the perception of the complaint being passed back/respondent turned away/ or that the service 'can't do anything for me' (12%). Figure 6 summarises this feedback, showing themes mentioned by more than 4% of respondents in their verbatim responses.

Figure 6: Reasons why making contact was considered difficult (unprompted responses)



Sample base: Shown in brackets. All respondents who did not consider it easy to make contact with the department (rating ease of contact lower than 8 out of 10). The chart includes responses mentioned by 4% or more respondents.

It should be noted that the time-lag between the service experience and completing the survey may have been up to several months for some respondents. Of the 33 full complaint respondents asked how well they remembered the process of being in touch with the department, 61% stated very well but 33% stated quite well and 6% not very well.

Main Report: Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

Sample Overview

Key Driver Analysis

Decision-tree and random forest analysis techniques were applied to the data where feasible and appropriate to identify the main influences on satisfaction among service users. These models are suited to identifying drivers where the dependent variable (i.e. variable being tested) is categorical (does not have a numeric value), and for a sample base of this size.

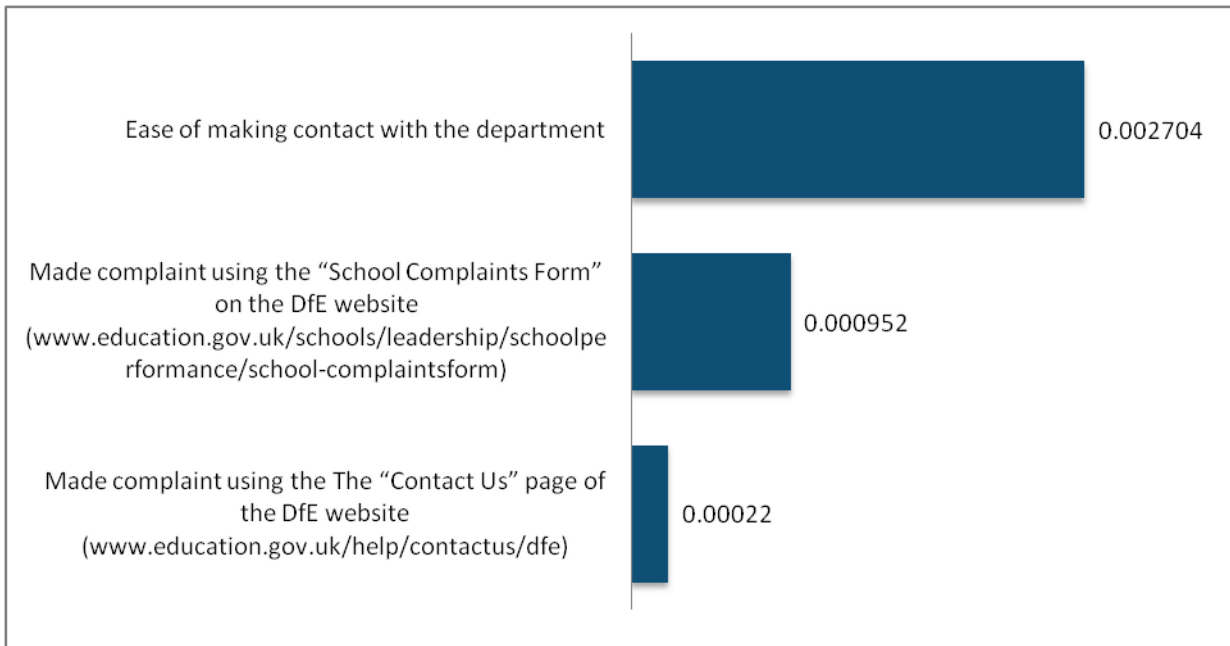
The approaches used indicate that across all respondents who completed a survey, and among the variables common to both questionnaires, the strongest predictor of satisfaction is **ease of being able to make contact** (Q4_2 on the questionnaire), whereby those who rate this most highly have higher overall levels of satisfaction.

Where analysis is done among the data deriving from the long questionnaire, there is agreement across full complaint only and full complaint with unknown outcome (EFA) samples, that the strongest predictor of satisfaction is **confidence in the complaint being taken seriously** (Q14_7), followed by **satisfaction with the time taken to reach an outcome** (Q10_2).

The relative 'influence' of the different variables across these samples is summarised in the three figures below. The scale used is known as 'permuted variable importance'. This has no definable limits and the relative point of each variable on the scale is more important than the point on the scale in itself.. Therefore, Figure 7 shows that ease of making contact the department is the factor which is most likely to influence whether a respondent is satisfied or not with the service received, across the whole sample. The other three variables shown are also an influence on satisfaction. Other questions asked in the survey are not shown in Figure 7, and therefore can be viewed as not significantly influencing satisfaction overall, across all respondents.

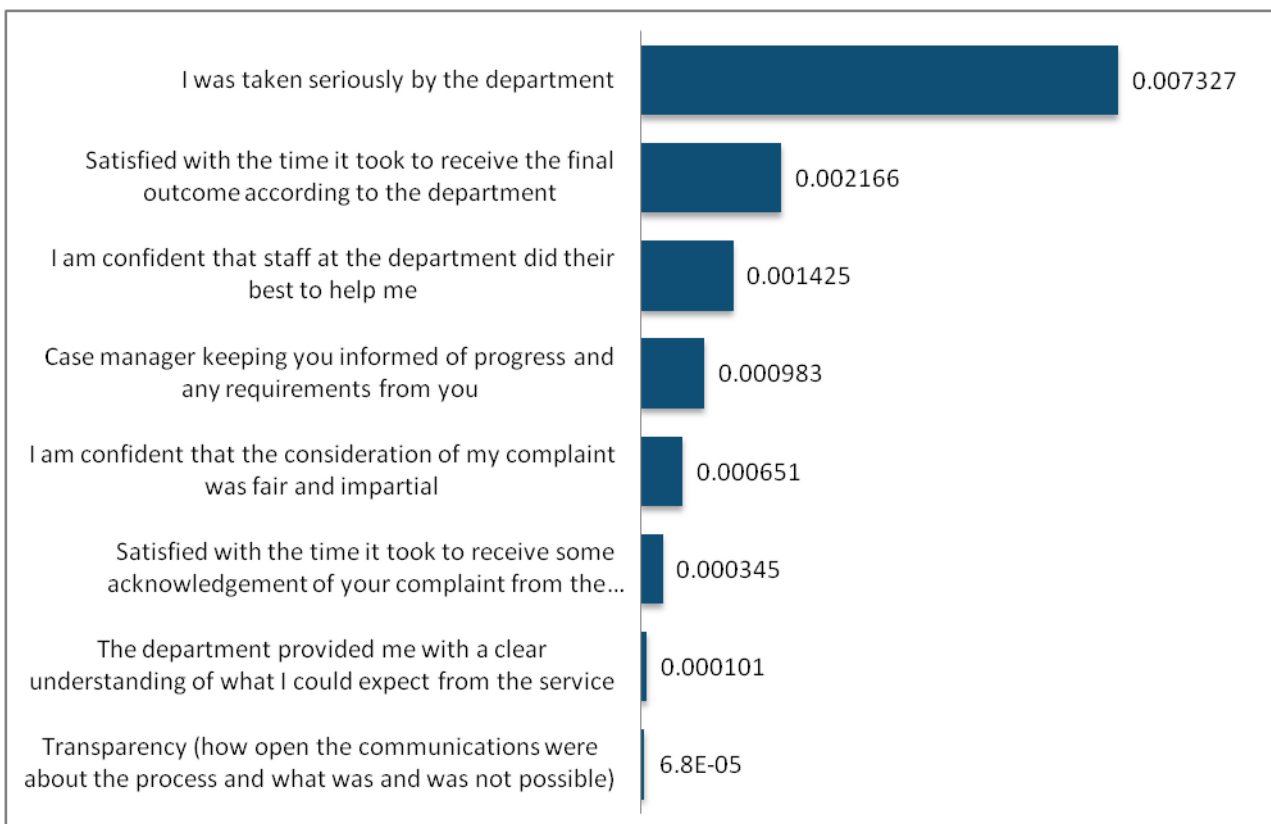
Figure 8 shows the same analysis excluding first stage only respondents from the sample. Among this group, being taken seriously is the factor which is most likely to influence whether a respondent is satisfied or not with the service received. Other variables with a notable influence on satisfaction include satisfaction with the time to a final outcome, confidence that staff are doing their best to help. and satisfaction with being kept up to date on progress and informed of requirements by the case manager. Other questions asked in the survey are not shown in Figure 8, and therefore can be viewed as not significantly influencing satisfaction overall, across this group of respondents.

Figure 7: Relative influence of variables identified as influential on satisfaction using 'Random Forest' key driver analysis techniques (all respondents)



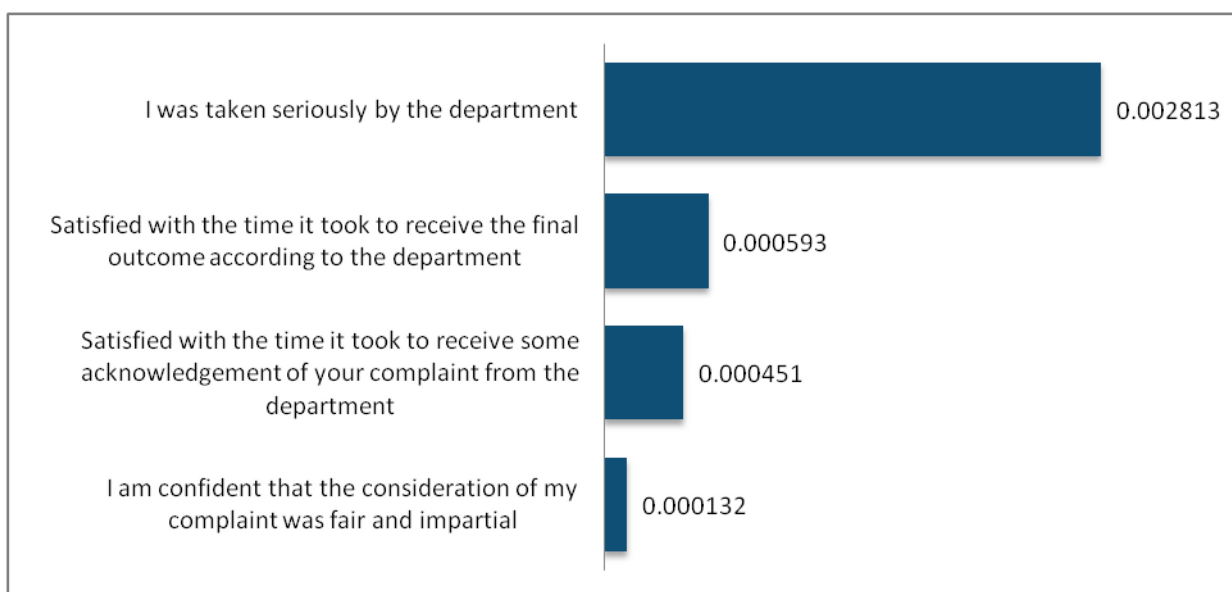
Sample base = 429 respondents

Figure 8: Relative influence of variables identified as influential on satisfaction using 'Random Forest' key driver analysis techniques (full complaint and unknown outcome respondents)



Sample base = 51 respondents

Figure 9: Relative influence of variables identified as influential on satisfaction using 'Random Forest' key driver analysis techniques (full complaint respondents only)



Sample base = 33 respondents

Please note that advocacy (how respondents talk to others about the department) was excluded from the variables tested for influence on satisfaction, on the basis of its close similarity to satisfaction, which would make the analysis tautological.

More detail on the key driver analysis undertaken can be found in the Technical Appendix.

First Stage Respondents

Sample Overview and Complaint Context

Sample profile overview

Just over 3 in 4 of first stage respondents were parents/guardians (77%), 1 in 5 (20%) were members of the general public and 3% were other types of complainant.

Just under 1 in 3 (32%) of first stage respondents were male, and 65% female (4% declining to respond).

Just 1% of first stage respondents were aged 16 to 24 years, 15% were 25 to 34 and 35% 35 to 44. A further 35% were 45 to 54 and 8% 55 to 64, with just 3% aged 65 years or older.

One in ten first stage respondents (10%) described themselves as having a disability. This is comparable with Census population statistics. The Census 2011 records 10% of adults aged 16 or older in England as having a disability which limits day to day activities 'a lot'

Making Contact

Just under a third of first stage respondents had found out about how to make a complaint via a general internet search (32%) and the same proportion from the department's 'Contact Us' page (32%). Smaller proportions mentioned the local authority (18%), friends/family (9%), the school (6%), and other ways. Where respondents had contacted the department by post, they were more likely to have found out about how to make a complaint another way (22% stating 'other') compared with those who emailed the department (8% stating 'other'). 'Other' mentions included parents/parent partnerships, MPs and Ofsted.

Looking at access into the service, just under a third of first stage respondents used the department's 'Contact Us' page (32%) and a slightly smaller proportion used the School Complaints Form on the department's website (28%). More than a third contacted the department by post (35%). Just over one in ten used the department's National Helpline (11%) and 9% considered they had contacted the department via another telephone channel.

It was common to have used multiple channels of access into the service. For example, among those known to have contacted the department online (and invited to take part in the survey by email), 43% specified that they had used the 'Contact Us' webpage, 35% the 'School Complaints Form' and 25% another email⁴, but also 15% considered that they had sent a letter and 10% had used the National Helpline.

First stage respondents were asked to use a scale of 1 to 10 to rate ease of finding information on how to make a complaint to the department about a school, and ease of making contact with the department. Ease of finding information on how to make a complaint was rated at 4.5 out of 10 (42% rating as 1-3 or difficult, 22% as 8-10 or easy and 35% as neither/nor, or 4-7 out of 10). Slightly higher rated was ease of making contact, at 4.9 as a mean. This reflected 41% who rated making contact as difficult (1-3 out of 10), 29% as easy (8-10 out of 10) and 29% as neither/nor (4-7 out of 10).

Among first stage respondents whose overall satisfaction with the department was low, the rating for finding information averaged 3.9 out of 10 and the rating for making contact averaged 4.0 out of 10 (ratings increasing directionally among those neutral or satisfied with the service overall, to 5.7 and 7.0 respectively).

Reasons given by first stage respondents for finding making contact difficult are set out in Figure 6 earlier in this report. They include lack of contact details (or not being able to access individuals/wanting a more personal service), a theme mentioned by 15% of first stage respondents. This may refer to perceptions of a corporate 'Contact Us' page, or may relate to communications received in the initial stages of contact

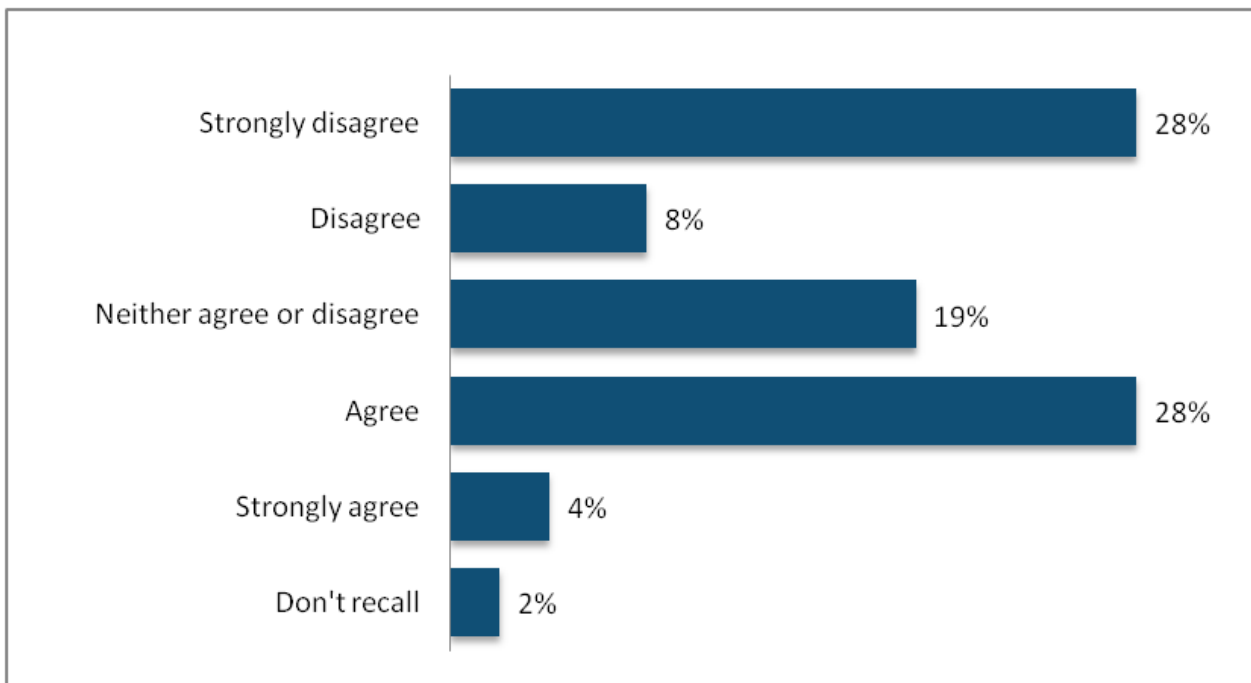
⁴ Other email addresses are not publicised so this may figure may include emails missent to other parties, or it may refer to emails to the EFA service.

The fact that the complaint was passed back, or the respondent was ‘turned away/they can’t do anything for me’ was mentioned as a reason why making contact was not easy by 12% of first stage respondents. Therefore service users do not always distinguish how they view access into the service from what they receive from the service overall. A further 12% of first stage respondents described the service as unresponsive or ‘slow to reply/had to chase’ (plus 6% mentioning ‘no reply’). 9% mentioned having difficulties with the web form or website. A further 7% mentioned it being ‘unclear who to complain to’ and 6% mentioned that it was all online or by letter and they would ‘prefer to talk’.

Being ‘passed back’

Where first stage respondents were asked to consider the statement ‘It was clearly explained why my complaint was being passed back to go through the school complaints process’, 36% disagreed that this was the case (28% responding strongly disagree and 8% disagree). A slightly lower 32% agreed that it had been clearly explained (4% responding strongly agree and 28% agree). The remaining 19% neither agreed nor disagreed, such that the overall balance of opinion was just slightly swayed towards disagreement – a rating of 2.7 on a scale where 1 is strongly disagree, 3 is neutral and 5 is strongly agree. (11% considered this question not applicable, excluded from Figure 10 below).

Figure 10: Agreement with the statement 'It was clearly explained why my complaint was being passed back to me to go via the school complaints process' (first stage respondents)



Sample base: All first stage respondents (229)

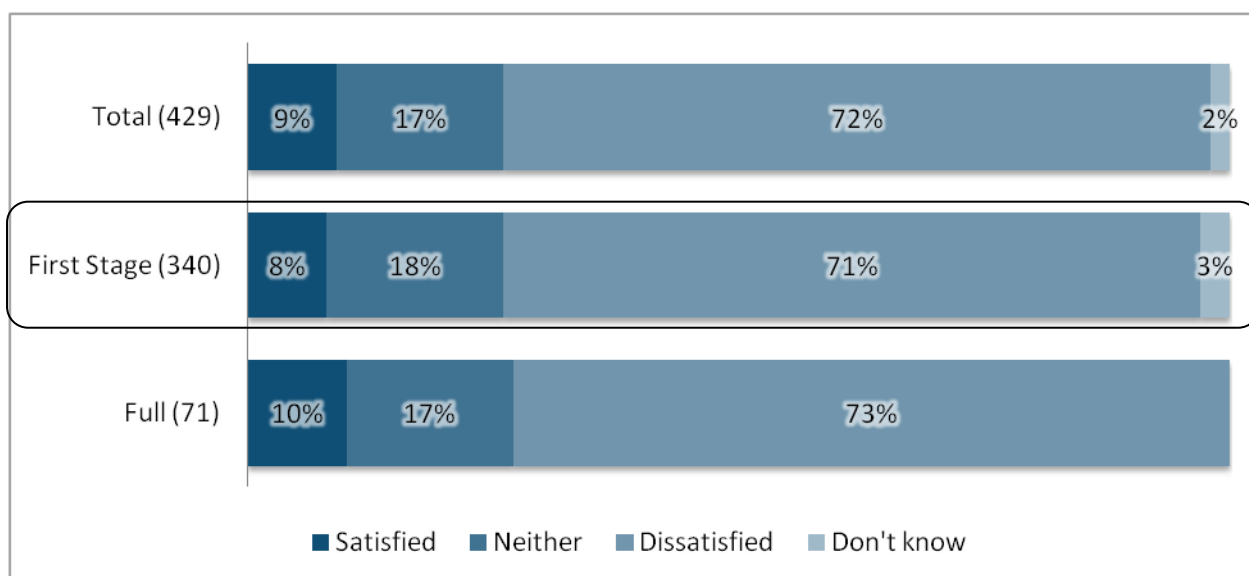
Dissatisfied respondents and those who are critical of the service were particularly likely to disagree on this statement (47% and 44% respectively). Other sub-groups analysed showed a fairly consistent balance of option.

Satisfaction and Advocacy

Where first stage respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the overall service provided by the department on a scale of 1 to 10, the largest proportion giving any rating gave the most negative rating of 1 (57%). The other (just under half of) respondents gave a wide range of different responses, from 2 to 10 out of 10.

Overall, 71% of first stage respondents were dissatisfied (giving a rating of 1-3 out of 10), 18% were neutral (4-7 out of 10) and 8% were satisfied (8-10 out of 10). As shown in Figure 11, satisfaction levels were not significantly different between first stage and full complaint respondents.

Figure 11: Satisfaction with the overall service provided by the department? (all respondents compared by complainant type)



Sample bases: Shown in brackets

The balance of opinion showed no significant variations across subgroups of first stage respondents analysed.

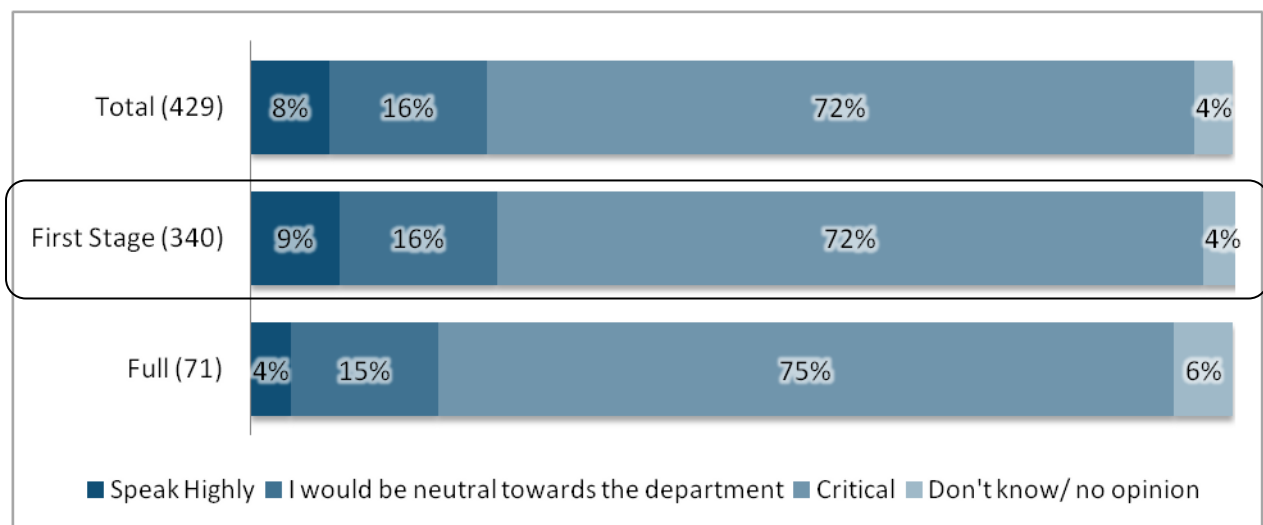
While not significantly different, mean satisfaction ratings were above 2.8 where first stage respondents had used either of the formal online access points ('contact us' or 'school complaints form' on the department website) compared to 2.4 or below among those who had contacted the department by other email, telephone, or post. This may potentially reflect the fact that those who do not use web-based channels may be more likely to have an expectation or preference for non-web-based, or more personalised contact channels, and this preference decreases their satisfaction overall with the service they receive.

Overall, first stage respondents were largely critical of the department and how it handles school complaints. Asked how they would talk of the service to other people, 36% would

be critical without being asked and 35% would be critical if they were asked. 16% would be neutral while 7% would speak highly of the department if they were asked and 1% would speak highly even without being asked.

Figure 12 shows advocacy compared by first stage and full complaint respondents. Differences in opinion here are not significantly different, although the percentage of first stage respondents saying that they would speak highly of the department is slightly higher than among full complaint respondents (9% and 4% respectively, combining 'if asked' and 'without being asked').

Figure 12: Advocacy: How respondents would speak to others about the department (all respondents compared by complainant type)



Sample base: Shown in brackets

First stage respondents categorised as general public were significantly more likely to speak critically of the department (84%) than parents or guardians (68%). This difference echoes their suggested lower levels of satisfaction, although the differences in satisfaction ratings were not statistically significant: Satisfaction ratings among the general public averaged 2.21 out of 10 when compared with parents/guardians at 2.75 out of 10.

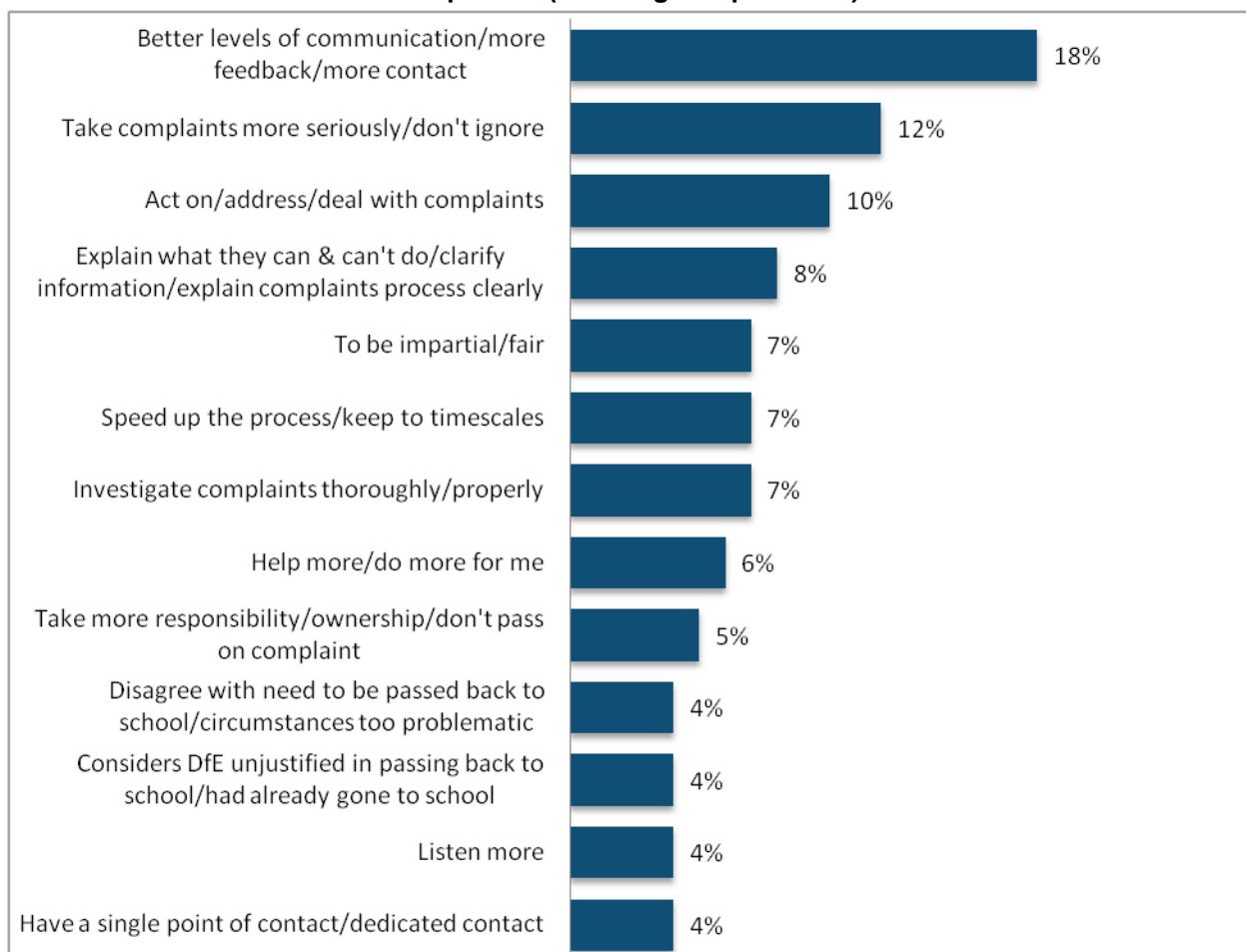
First stage responses suggested that 'more contact' should be a focal point for service improvement going forwards. When asked how the department could make them more satisfied with the service for people who wish to make a complaint about a school, 18% said better levels of communication/more feedback/more contact. A further 12% felt that the service should 'take complaints more seriously/don't ignore' (again suggesting more contact, while also likely reflecting views in relation to being passed back). 10% stated 'act on/deal with complaints'.

Areas for improvement mentioned by less than 10% of first stage service users included explaining what can and cannot be done (8%), being impartial/fair (7%), speeding up the

process or keeping to timescales (7%), investigating complaints thoroughly/properly (7%), 'help more/do more for me' (6%), and taking more ownership or responsibility (5%).

A fuller list of coded suggestions for improving the service among first stage respondents, is provided as Figure 13.

Figure 13: Ways the department could improve satisfaction with the service – unprompted responses (first stage respondents)



Sample base: All first stage respondents (340). The chart includes responses mentioned by 4% or more respondents.

Among first stage respondents, the general public were significantly more likely to mention being impartial or fair as a suggested service improvement (15%) than parents/guardians (5%), suggesting that among parents who are first stage complainants, impartiality is not generally seen as an issue

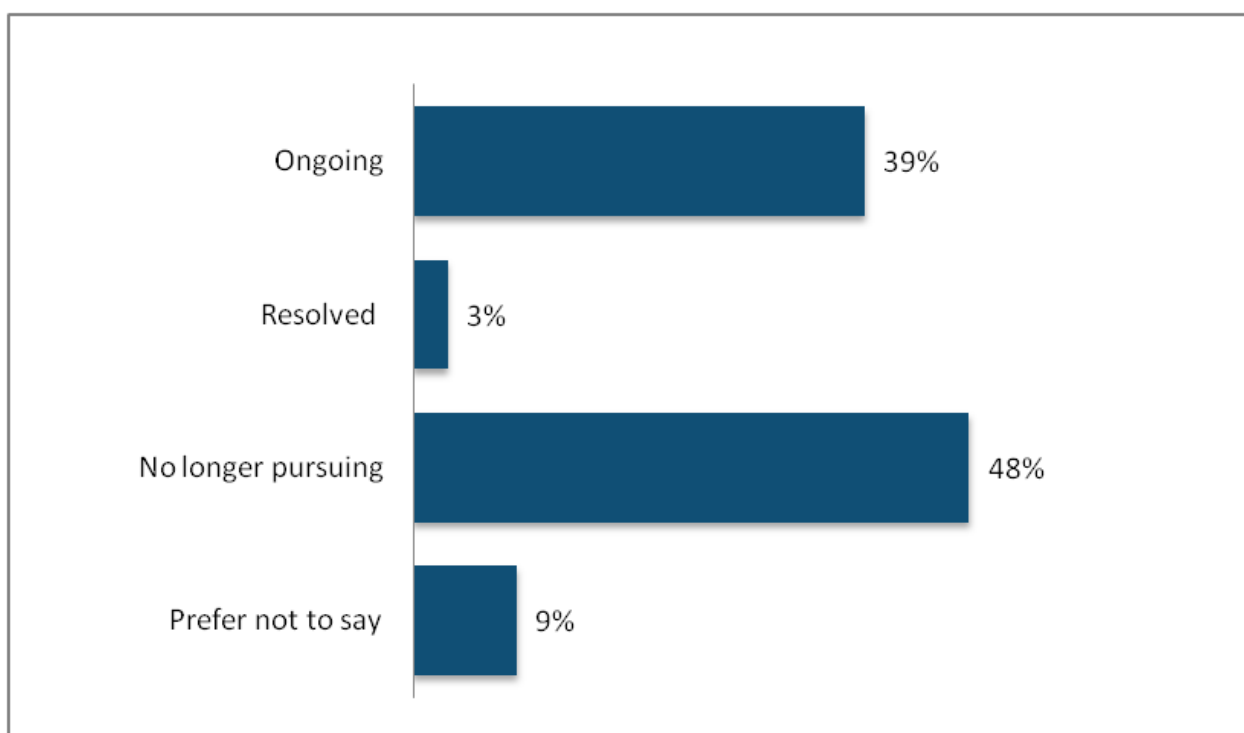
Full Complaint Respondents

Sample Overview and Complaint Context

Complaint context

Full complaint respondents with an outcome recorded (33 respondents), were asked which of three options best described how they saw their complaint at the time of completing the survey, considering it outside of the department's remit and irrespective of the outcome they received from the department. Among these 39% considered that their complaint was ongoing. The largest proportion of 48% said that they were no longer pursuing their complaint, while only 3% considered their outcome to be resolved. The remaining 9% declined to respond.

Figure 14: Complaint status outside of the department's remit and outcome (full complaint respondents)



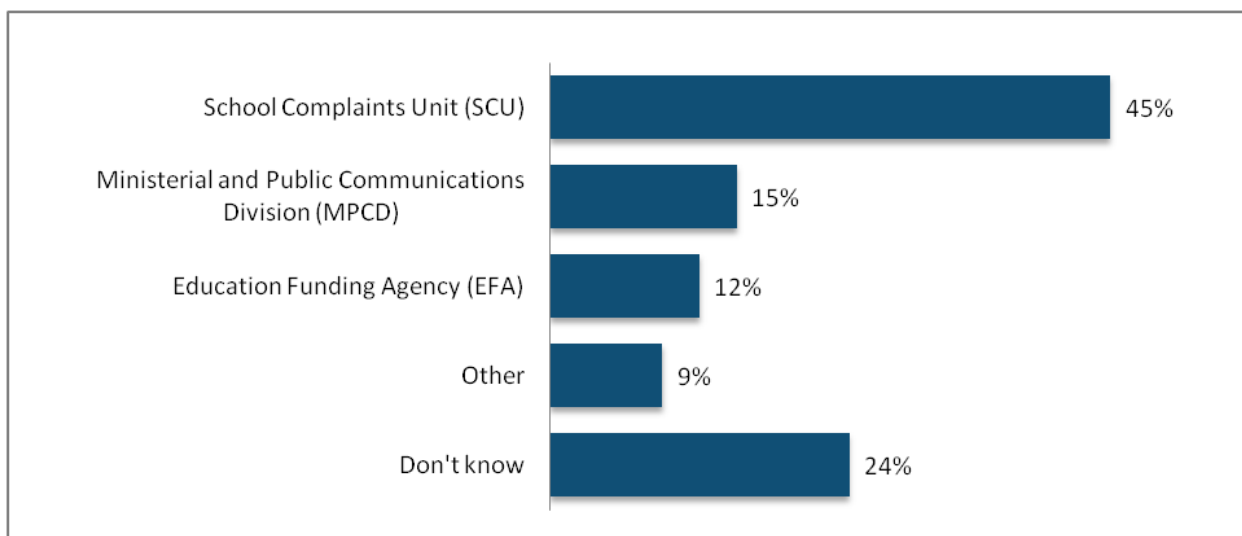
Sample base: All full complaint respondents (33)

It should be noted that for some respondents, several months may have passed between receiving their outcome from the department, and completing the survey. Of the 33 valid full complaint respondents, 61% stated that they remembered the process of being in contact with the department very well, 33% stated quite well, and 6% stated not very well.

Considering which team or teams of the department were involved in considering or dealing with their complaint, the most common response was the School Complaints Unit (SCU), mentioned by 45% of full complaint respondents. This was followed by the Ministerial and Public Communications Division or MPCD (15%) and the Education

Funding Agency (12%). Please note that respondents were allowed to offer multiple responses here and a small minority did so (such that Figure 15 adds up to 105%).

Figure 15: Team(s) of the department seen as involved in considering or dealing with the complaint (full complaint respondents)



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (33)

Sample profile overview

3 in 4 full complaint respondents were parents/guardians (75%), 23% were members of the general public and 3% were other types of complainant.

The majority of full complaint respondents were female (61%), while 35% were male. The remaining 4% declined to respond.

Only 4% of respondents were aged 16 to 24 years, while 14% were 25 to 34 and 28% were 35 to 44. Almost two in five (39%) fell into the 45 to 54 category, with 4% being aged 55 to 64, and 4% aged 65 or over.

Just over one in ten (11%) of full complaint respondents considered themselves to have a disability. Again this is comparable with Census population statistics. The Census 2011 records 10% of adults aged 16 or older in England as having a disability which limits day to day activities 'a lot'.

Making Contact

Almost a third (31%) of full complaint respondents first found out about how to make a complaint to the department about a school from the DfE website/'Contact Us' page. A further 27% found out from doing a general internet search. Around one in five (21%) found out via the local authority. Fewer respondents mentioned other sources, including friends/family (13%), and the school (8%). (see Figure 4 earlier in this report).

When making their complaint to the department, respondents used a range of channels, and in some cases more than one channel. The most popular channel was via post/letter (35%), followed by email (31%), the 'School Complaints Form' on the DfE website (27%) and the 'Contact Us' page of the DfE website (25%). Fewer respondents mentioned other channels, specifically the DfE National Helpline (6%), other telephone (7%). 6% of full complaint respondents did not recall which channel they used to make their complaint. (See Figure 5 earlier in this report).

Commenting on how easy or difficult it was to find information on how to make a school complaint, on a scale of 1 to 10, full complaint respondents gave a mean score rating of 4.5. This broke down into 42% of respondents claiming it was difficult (1-3 out of 10), 18% easy (8-10 out of 10) and 35% neither/nor (4-7 out of 10).

Rating how easy or difficult it was to subsequently make contact with the department, respondents scored this similarly at 4.6. Almost half (49%) found it difficult, 30% found it easy, and 21% found it neither easy nor difficult. Reasons are set out in Figure 6 earlier in this report, which reflect a preference for a more personalised service, and perceptions of the service being slow to reply or not being able to help.

Quality of Service received

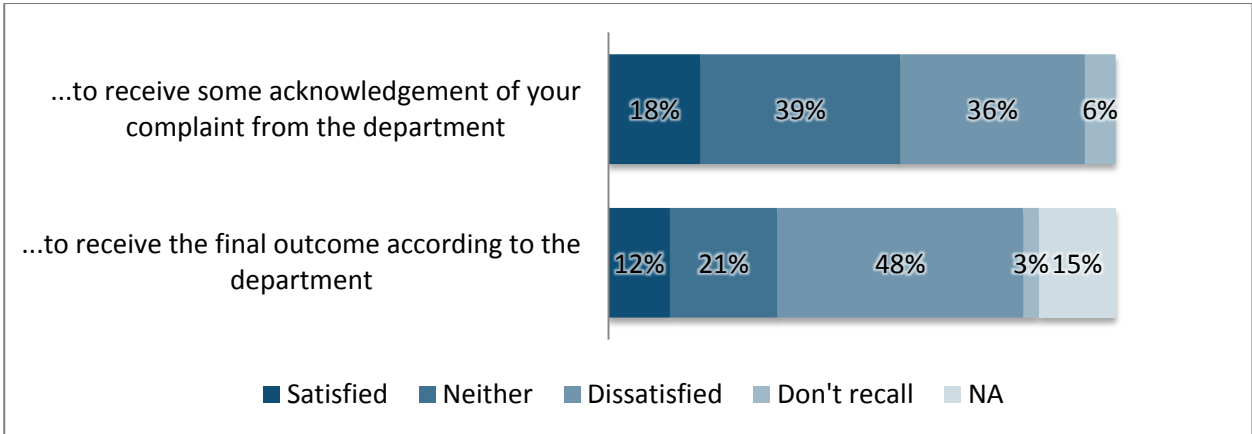
Satisfaction with time taken

Full complaint respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the time it took to receive an acknowledgement from the department, and the time it took to receive the final outcome according to the department, using a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 is very satisfied and 1 is very dissatisfied. The mean rating given by full complaint respondents was 4.6 in terms of the time to receive an acknowledgement from the department and 3.4 in terms of receiving the final outcome from the department. Therefore, there are lower levels of satisfaction with the length of time to a full outcome compared with the length of time to an initial acknowledgement.

In percentage terms, considering the time it took to some acknowledgement of the complaint, 36% were dissatisfied (rating 1-3 out of 10), 39% were neutral (rating 4-7 out of 10) and 18% were satisfied (rating 8-10 out of 10).

In relation to time to a full outcome, 48% were dissatisfied (rating 1-3 out of 10), 21% were neutral (rating 4-7 out of 10) and 12% were satisfied (rating 8-10 out of 10).

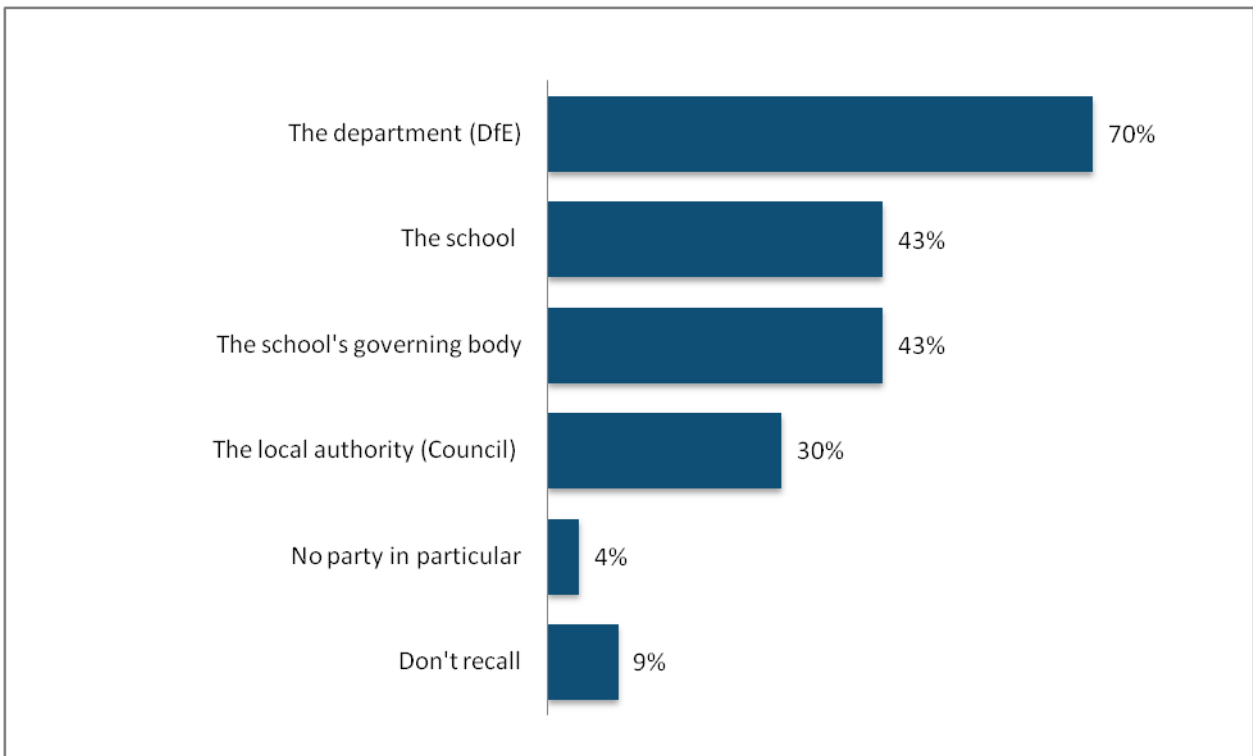
Figure 16: Satisfaction with the length of time it took... (full complaint respondents)



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (33)

Where respondents considered that it took too long (a small base of 23 respondents), 70% considered the department to be the cause of the delay. Respondents were permitted to state multiple parties. A further 43% stated the school, 43% the school’s governing body, and 30% the local authority. 9% could not recall and 4% considered no party in particular to be the cause.

Figure 17: Party/parties considered to be the cause of the delay by those who felt that the process took too long (full complaint respondents who felt the process to outcome was too long) CAUTION – LOW BASE*

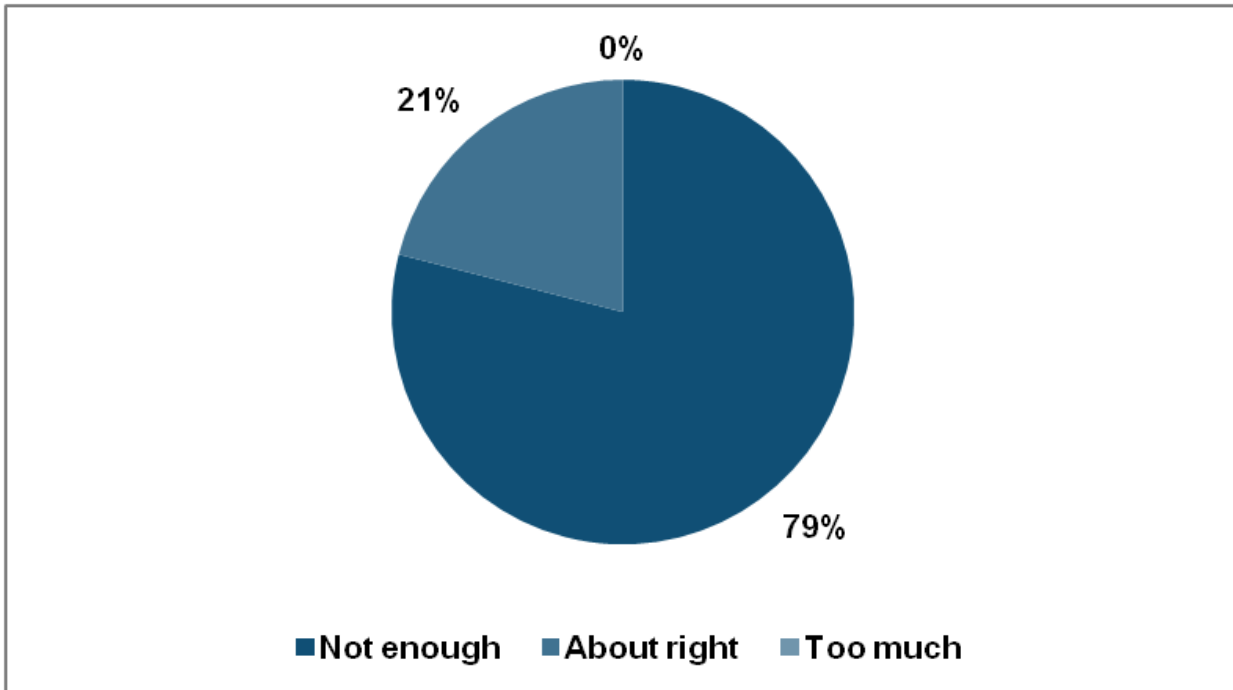


Sample base: Full complaint respondents who considered the process too long (*23)

Other aspects of the service

Full complaint service users would like more contact overall from the department. When questioned directly on this topic in the survey, 79% considered that the amount of contact they had with the department was not enough and 21% considered this about right. None of the 33 full complaint respondents answering this question considered that they had had too much contact with the department in relation to their complaint.

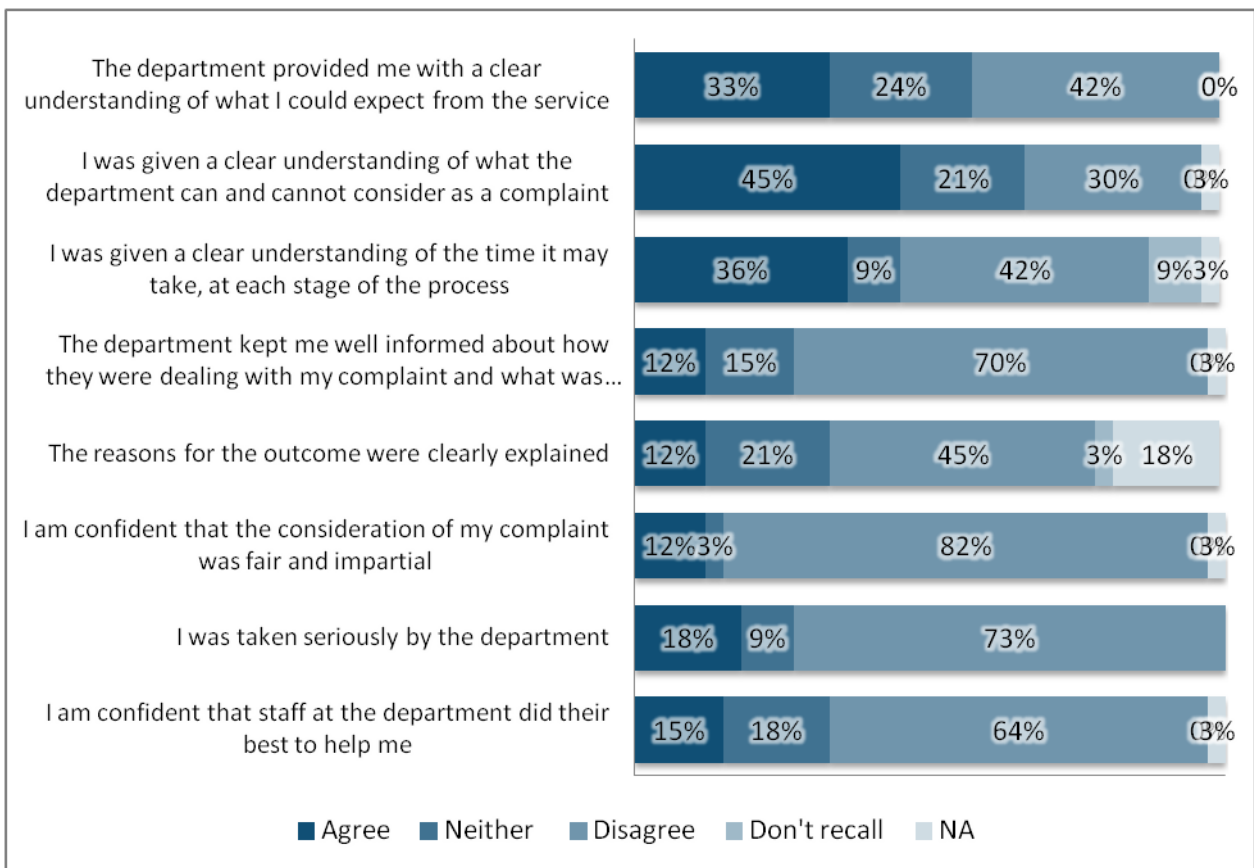
Figure 18: Whether the amount of contact with the department in relation to the complaint not enough, about right or too much (full complaint respondents)



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (33)

Full complaint respondents were also asked to rate their satisfaction with a range of specific aspects of the service they received. Their feedback reflects varying levels of satisfaction by aspect of service. Respondents were more likely to agree that they were given a clear understanding of what the department can and cannot consider as a complaint (45% agree), the time it may take (36% agree) and what could be expected from the service (33% agree). However, there was higher disagreement with having confidence that the consideration of their complaint was fair and impartial (82% disagree), that they were taken seriously by the department (73% disagree), that they were kept well informed (70% disagree) and that they had confidence that staff at the department did their best to help (64% disagree).

Figure 19: Level of agreement with statements on aspects of the service received (full complaint respondents)



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (33)

For those that disagreed with any of the statements at Q14 (listed above) and felt that the service provided was not satisfactory, they were asked to provide detail on why. The bases vary and caution should be applied due to small bases on all individual statements. Overall the primary reasons for dissatisfaction largely appear to relate to perceptions of insufficient, vague or unclear information, with demand for more contact, more explanations and more detail, as well as some perception of bias towards the school.

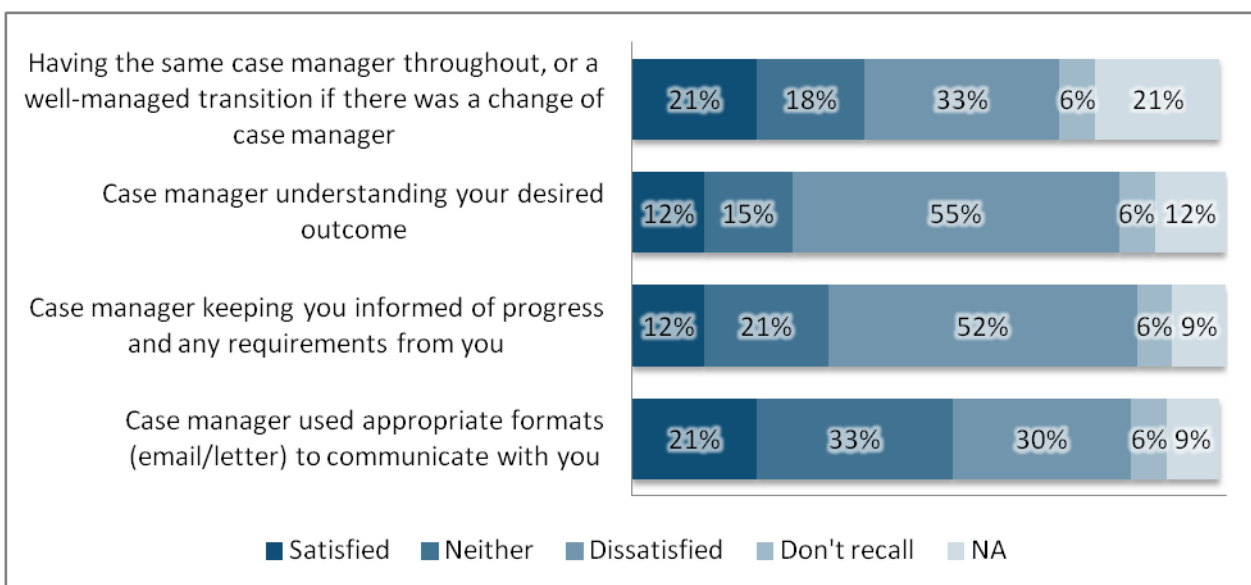
Table 1 Reasons for disagreement on statements regarding aspects of service – unprompted (full complaint respondents)

Statement disagreed with CAUTION – LOW BASES	Reasons (responses over 10%)
The department provided me with a clear understanding of what I could expect from the service (Base: 14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information was too vague/unclear/not detailed enough (36%) • Not informed/received no explanations/information (14%)
I was given a clear understanding of what the department can and cannot consider as a complaint (Base: 10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not informed/received no explanations/information (30%) • Informed that nothing could be done (20%) • Too much legal/technical jargon used (10%)
I was given a clear understanding of the time it may take, at each stage of the process (Base: 14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timescales given were inaccurate (took longer) (36%) • Information was too vague/unclear/not detailed enough (14%) • Not informed/received no explanations/information (14%)
The department kept me well informed about how they were dealing with my complaint and what was required from me (Base: 23)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not informed/received no explanations/information (39%) • Limited contact/communication (22%) • Had to chase them for information (17%)
The reasons for the outcome were clearly explained (Base: 15)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information was too vague/unclear/not detailed enough (20%) • Received unsatisfactory reasons/explanation (20%) • Did not fully answer issue/all of the issues (13%)
I am confident that the consideration of my complaint was fair and impartial (Base: 27)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incident wasn't fully/properly investigated (including lack of interest shown) (22%) • Department was biased towards school (including cover-up) (19%) • Complaint is ongoing/no outcome yet (11%) • Wasn't given chance to give evidence/had evidence dismissed (11%)
I was taken seriously by the department (Base: 24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't understand the reasoning behind decision/outcome contradicts evidence (17%) • Incident wasn't fully/properly investigated (including lack of interest shown) (17%)
I am confident that staff at the department did their best to help me (Base: 21)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department was biased towards school (including cover-up) (19%) • Staff appeared uninterested/had an uncaring attitude (14%) • Limited contact/communication (10%) • Incident wasn't fully/properly investigated (including lack of interest shown) (10%)

Of the 33 valid full complaint respondents who were allocated a case manager respondents were most satisfied with the case manager’s use of appropriate communication formats (21% satisfied i.e. rating this 8-10 out of 10 in terms of satisfaction). There was also a relatively good level of satisfaction with having the same case manager throughout or a well-managed transition if there was a change (again 21% satisfied and rating this 8-10 out of 10).

However, dissatisfaction was high, particularly in terms of the case manager’s understanding of the desired outcome (55% dissatisfied or 1-3 out of 10) and keeping complainants informed of progress and any requirements from them (52% dissatisfied). The latter variable is identified in the Key Driver analysis as an important influence on overall satisfaction among full complaint respondents (See Figure 8 earlier in this report), and therefore an improvement in the case manager keeping complainants informed is likely to have a very positive impact on satisfaction (see section ‘Key Driver Analysis’).

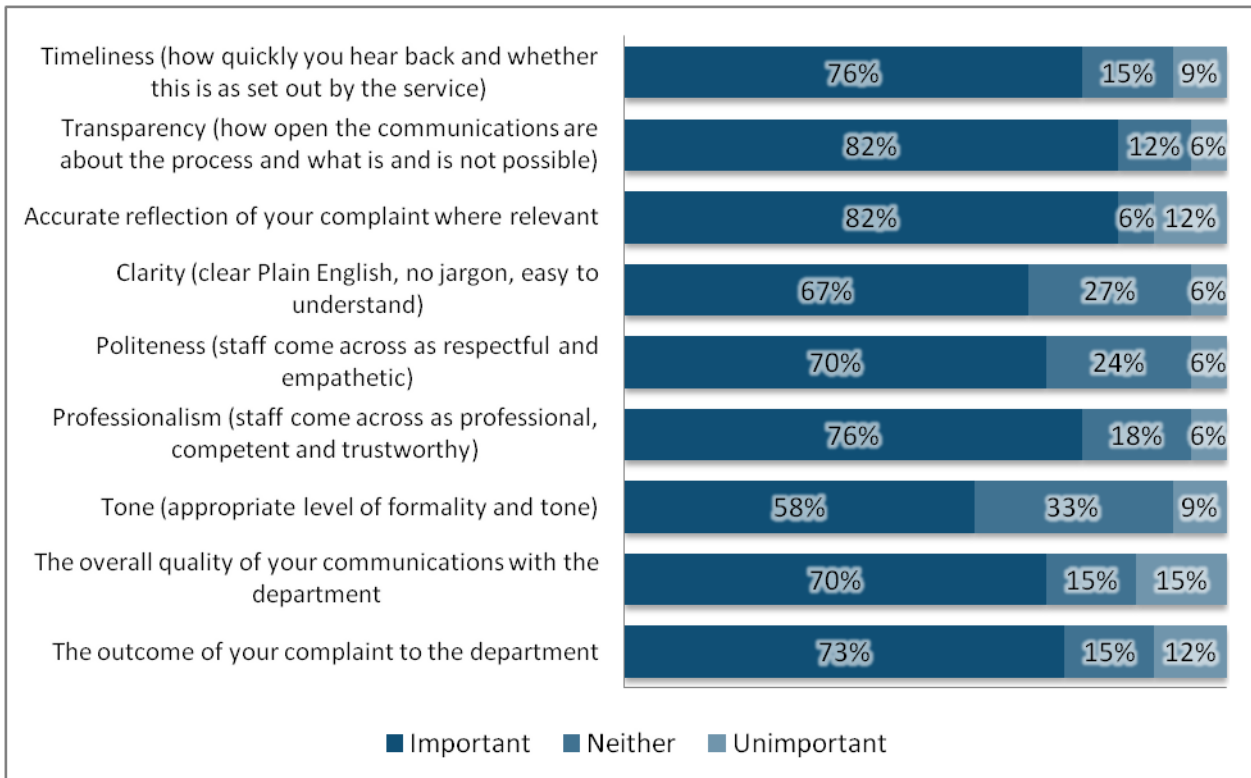
Figure 20: Level of satisfaction with aspects of the service provided by the case manager (full complaint respondents)



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (33)

When asked to rate how important each aspect of service is on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is not at all and 10 is very important, complainants stated that transparency and accuracy were most important (each rated 8-10 out of 10 by 82% of full stage respondents). This is followed by timeliness (76%), professionalism (76%) and the outcome of the complaint (73%). Tone was rated as the least important aspect of service (58% rating this 8-10 out of 10 on a 1-10 importance scale).

Figure 21: Perceived importance of aspects of service (full complaint respondents)

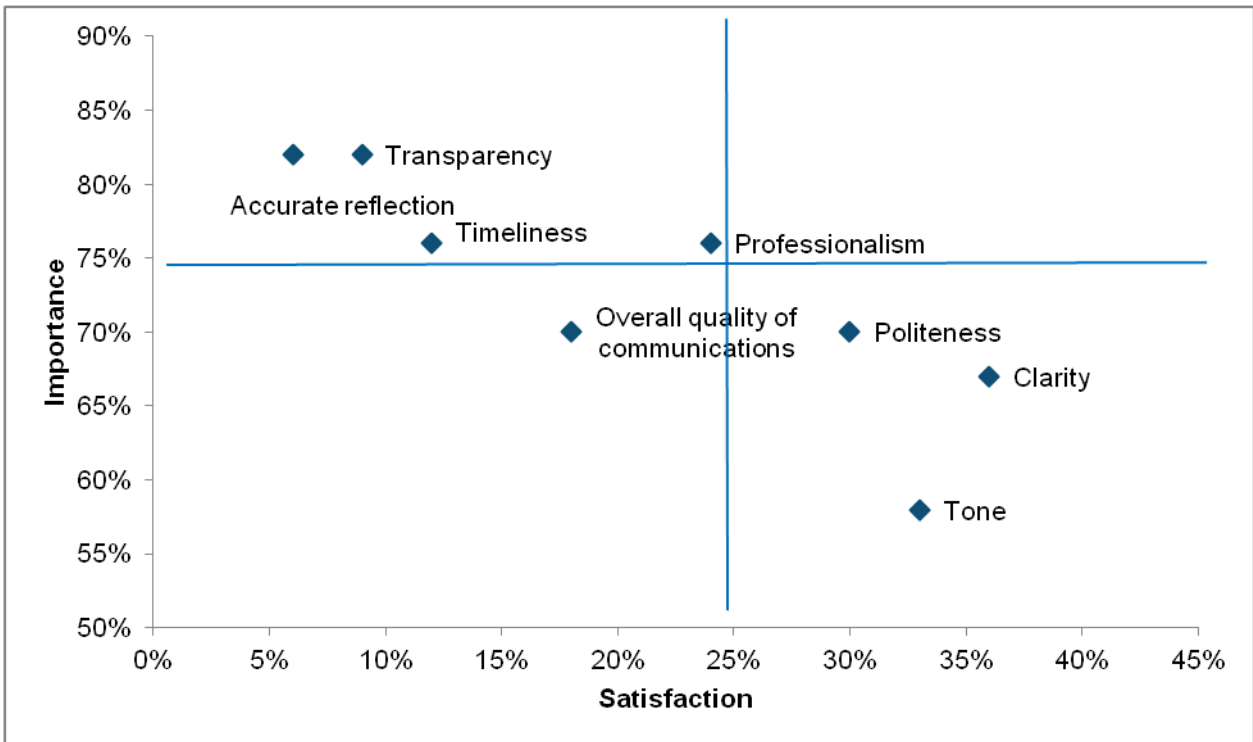


Sample base: All full complaint respondents (33). Note: Important denotes those rating 8-10 out of 10, neither = 4-7 out of 10, and unimportant = 1-3 out of 10

In general, case managers tended to achieve higher satisfaction ratings in the aspects of lower importance to complainants and vice versa. For example, on the most important aspects of accurately reflecting the complaint, and transparency, 61% and 48% (respectively) of respondents rated these aspects as poor (1-3 out of 10). Conversely, tone was rated as poor by only 21% of respondents. Overall, the department achieved the highest proportions of ‘good’ ratings (8-10 out of 10) on clarity (36%), tone (33%), politeness (30%) and professionalism (24%). All other aspects had fewer than one in five rating the service as ‘good’.

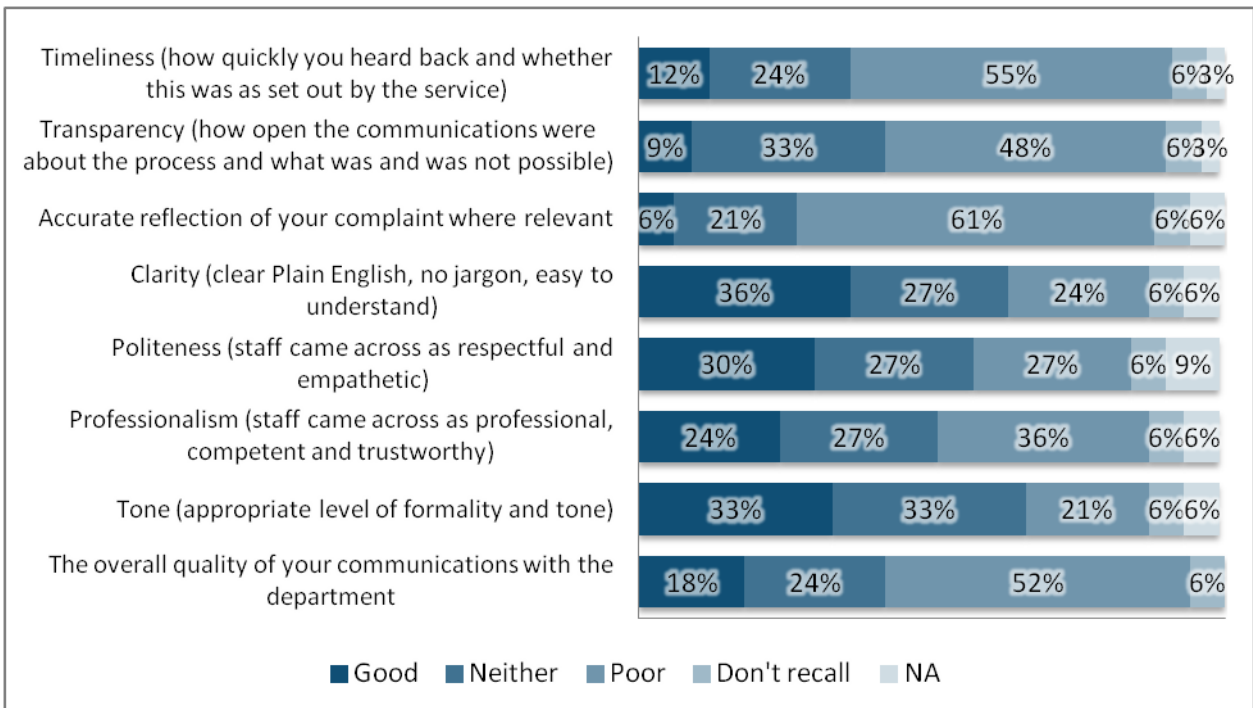
Figure 22 therefore represents a significant opportunity for service improvement, by shifting variables in the upper left quarter (higher importance, lower satisfaction) into the right side of the figure (higher satisfaction, or ‘good’ ratings).

Figure 22: Importance vs. Satisfaction ratings on aspects of service provided by the case manager (full complaint respondents)



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (33). Combines Q18 & Q19, excl. outcome.

Figure 23: Rating of the quality of communications with case manager across different aspects (full complaint respondents)



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (33)

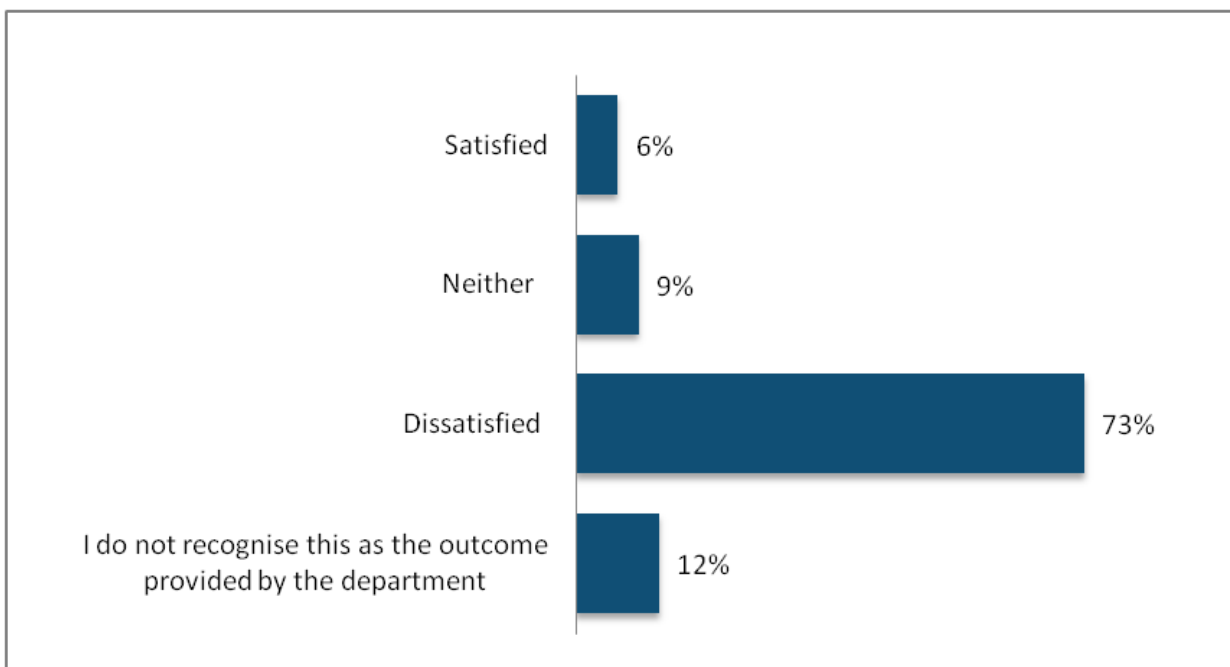
Satisfaction and Advocacy

Full complaint respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the outcome of their complaint, under the department's school complaints process, using a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 was very dissatisfied and 10 was very satisfied. It was set out above the question that this referred to 'the outcome communicated to you as upheld, partially upheld or not upheld'.

Of the 33 with a known outcome (upheld/partially upheld or not upheld), the mean rating was 2.4 on the 1-10 scale. 73% were dissatisfied with the outcome (giving a rating of 1-3 out of 10), 9% were neutral (rating 4-7 out of 10), and 6% were satisfied with the outcome (equivalent to two respondents who rated the outcome 10 out of 10).

12% did not respond here. When these are excluded, a total of 83% are dissatisfied, 10% neither and 7% satisfied, applying caution due to small base sizes.

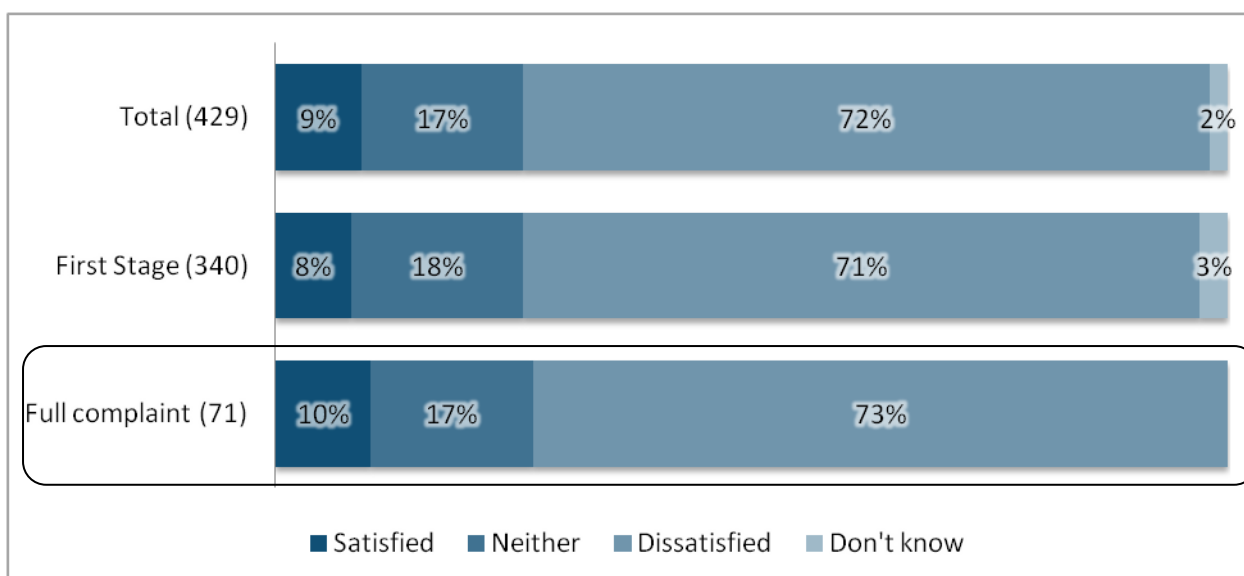
Figure 24: Satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint under the department's school complaints process (full complaint respondents)



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (33)

When full complaint respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the overall service provided by the department on a scale of 1 to 10, the mean rating was 2.8. As shown in Figure 25, almost three quarters (73%) were dissatisfied (1-3 out of 10), while 10% were satisfied (8-10 out of 10) and 17% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Figure 25: Satisfaction with the overall service provided by the department? (all respondents compared by complainant type)



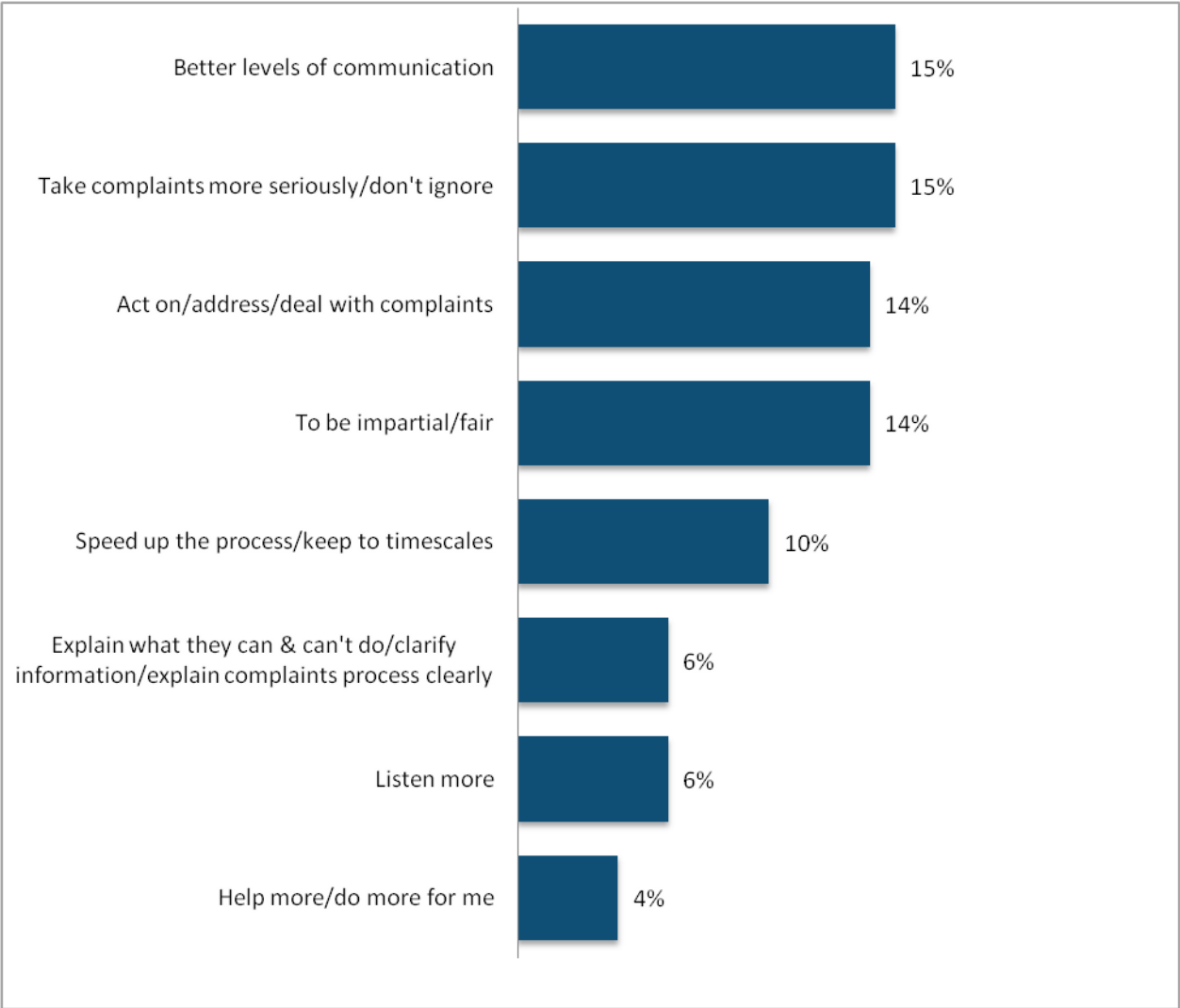
Sample bases: Shown in brackets

Three quarters (75%) of full complaint respondents claim they would be critical of the department and how it handles school complaints when speaking to other people. Specifically, 42% claim they would be critical without being asked, while a further 32% claim they would be critical if they were asked. Only 4% would speak highly of the department (if asked/without being asked), while 15% would be neutral.

Respondents were asked how the department could make them more satisfied with the service. As shown in Figure 26, the main areas for improvement according to full complaint respondents were to provide 'better levels of communication/more feedback/more contact' (15%), 'take complaints more seriously/don't ignore' (15%), be 'impartial/fair' (14%), 'act on/address/deal with complaints' (14%) and 'speed up the process/keep to timescales' (10%). These were similar to suggestions by first stage respondents, as shown in Figure 13 earlier in this report.

Areas for improvement mentioned by less than 10% by full complaint respondents included 'listen more' (6%), 'explain what they can & can't do/clarify information/explain complaints process clearly' (6%), and 'help more/do more for me' (4%). Some respondents expressed dissatisfaction with needing to be passed back to school or the circumstances being too problematic to allow this (3%). Therefore it is likely that some feedback here relates to what they would like to see as the remit of the department and not solely to features of the service provided.

Figure 26: Ways the department could improve satisfaction with their service – unprompted responses (full complaint respondents)



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (71). The chart includes responses mentioned by 4% or more respondents.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Driving Service Improvements

The survey delivers some clear indications on where service improvements can be achieved.

As shown by the Key Driver analysis, service user satisfaction is likely to be improved most across all service users by increasing ease of making contact. In respondents' words, this can be achieved through making the service more personal, ideally providing contact details so that users can access individuals, and by making the service more responsive and quicker in its replies. Where respondents need to be passed back to the local school process, communications should aim to mitigate the perception of being 'turned away/can't do anything for me'.

Among the full complaint cohort, the department will make greatest strides in improving customer satisfaction by increasing service users' confidence in 'the complaint being taken seriously', and decreasing the time from initial complaint to final outcome. Impartiality (including avoiding any perceived bias towards the school) and the case manager keeping the complainant informed, are further factors which influence satisfaction within this group.

There is a strong demand for more communications and more contact in general. When all respondents are asked directly, and without any prompting, how they feel the service can improve, their comments largely echo the Key Driver analysis, and the most common request is for more contact/feedback or better levels of communication, followed by taking complaints more seriously or 'not ignoring them', and acting on or addressing complaints. Impartiality was also mentioned as a key factor for some, as was the speed to an outcome.

Focusing on case manager performance, there is some positive feedback from service users on clarity, tone, professionalism and politeness,. However, these factors are rated less important overall to complainants than the case manager accurately reflecting their complaint, being transparent and the timeliness of the service. By shifting these variables from the upper left quarter of the Importance-Satisfaction matrix⁵ (higher importance, lower satisfaction) into the right side (higher satisfaction), the department is likely to achieve a significant improvement in ratings of case manager communications.

⁵ Figure 25 in this report

Considerations on method

Undertaking satisfaction research among users of the department's school complaints service involves a number of challenges. The complaints dealt with are highly emotive and the *outcome* provided by the service is not synonymous with what a service user may see as a *complaint resolution* due to the scope of the department's powers: Only 3% of respondents known to have received an outcome from the department describe their complaint as resolved, while half state that they are no longer pursuing it and two-fifths describe their complaint as ongoing. Further, there is a perception among respondents that if one has been 'passed back' by the department (to go through the local school complaints process), this does not equate to receiving a service, irrespective of any interactions with the service that have taken place⁶.

These issues were largely foreseen and measures put in place to mitigate their impact on the research as far as possible, including well-designed questionnaires and supporting communications, a freephone helpline and email service, choice in mode of completion, and use of multiple reminders. All communications (available on request) set out the aims and objectives of the research, and queries were clarified where necessary.

Future research among service users will benefit from the appending of outcome data to the sample frame (database of contacts) prior to fieldwork.

We also recommend that the department explores options with BMG Research to undertake research with service users as close as possible to them receiving their outcome from the department. While the majority of respondents⁷ considered that they had a good recollection of the service received, more than a third acknowledged some vagueness. For some, their experience of the department may have been several months prior to receiving the questionnaire. By asking service users whether they would be happy to undertake research on service user satisfaction at the point of contact, or on completion of communications with the department, this opens up the possibility of undertaking research at earlier stages of the 'customer journey' to better understand the factors at play and to better distinguish satisfaction with communications from satisfaction with outcome and service-scope.

In addition to undertaking a survey we recommend the integration of a small programme of qualitative interviewing in the next wave, to unpick some of the comments provided, and offer greater clarity on the aspects of service driving satisfaction and dissatisfaction. A depth-interview approach would be particularly suited to exploring any reasons why users of the online Contact Us page may be more slightly more satisfied, and the extent to which this is linked to the services information provided online.

⁶ This perception was highlighted by verbatim feedback to the survey's open questions and from communications from survey recipients to the research agency, via the helpline, email and in handwritten communications returned with questionnaires.

⁷ This question was asked of full complaint respondents only.

Technical Appendix

Target Audience and Method

The target audience for the research was all those who contacted the department between August 2012 and July 2013, the first year in which the new School Complaint unit was operational. In its first year of operation the department received c1,500 complaints about schools. Of these 284 were accepted for further more detailed consideration, while the remainder were referred back to the local school complaints process.

An opt-out exercise was conducted by the department in compliance with data protection guidelines such that service users were given the opportunity to decline from taking part in the research, and these were removed from the survey sample. Further removals were made from the sample on the basis of complaints being ongoing (no outcome and not passed back to the school) or communications being ongoing. BMG received a database of 1502 contacts before removing 17 contacts from the sample on the basis of duplicate contacts, or insufficient contact information/no name specified.

The questionnaire was administered online or by post according to each respondent's initial mode of contact with the department. To maximise response rates respondents were given choice in how they could complete the survey. Three mailings/e-mailings were administered, and reminder calls were made among the minority of complainants where telephone numbers were available.

Sample size and robustness

The final sample invited to take part in the survey comprised 1485 contacts, of whom 429 completed a survey. This equates to a response rate of 29% overall.

This sample size offers a maximum confidence level (margin of error) on a full base of +- 4.7%. This is fairly robust, indicating that a response of 50% in the survey would be between 45.3% and 54.7% if asked across the target population.

The confidence interval varies according to the number of people who respond to a particular question, and according to the response itself (the closer a response gets to 50% the larger the potential error in the survey result). Many of the questions are reported on a lower base of respondents than 429, which increases the margin of error. However many of the questions are reported at the upper or lower end of response scales (e.g. 90% as opposed to 50%), which reduces the margin of error. Some cases switched first stage/full complaint status at the analysis stage, when data on complaint outcomes became available. Cases considered by EFA without an available outcome were allocated their own category at this stage, and excluded from the main analysis.

Due to this recategorisation, question bases for full complaint respondents vary from a base of 71 respondents where a question was common to the short and long versions of the questionnaire and 33 where a question was asked only in the long version of the questionnaire. Maximum confidence levels are therefore $\pm 11.6\%$ and $\pm 17.1\%$ respectively. Caution is advised when interpreting findings on the base of 33 respondents and the full complaint results in this report are reported at a topline level only.

The data is reported unweighted and therefore represents the real number of respondents in all cases. Weighting factors decrease the effective sample size of a sample, and the difference in responses across subgroups was not considered sufficient to justify using weighting factors on this data. Many of the questions in the survey show similar results irrespective of subgroup, including whether the respondent was a first stage complainant or whether they received an outcome from the department, and so weighting the data by respondent type would be unlikely to generate a very different result.

Data outputs

Three sets of data tabulations were produced based on the results of the survey:

- A combined data for questions common to the long and short questionnaires
- A filtered report based on full complaint respondents
- A filtered report based on first stage respondents

Sub-groups analysed, where sample size allowed include

- Complainant type
- Mode of contact (DfE records)
- Channels of contact (stated by respondent)
- Complaint Outcome (DfE records)
- Considers Complaint (resolved/ongoing/not pursuing)
- How well recalls complaint
- Complaint completing Group (SCU/Other)
- Respondent type (general public/parent/other)
- Mode of completion of survey
- Satisfaction
- Advocacy
- Gender
- Age
- Impairment
- Ethnicity

Where the subgroup base is too low, or the analysed showed no significant variation by subgroup at the 95% level of significance (a 19 in 20 chance of being true across the population targeted), variations have not been drawn out in this written report.

The data used in this report is rounded up or down to the nearest whole percentage point. It is for this reason that, on occasions, tables or charts may add up to 99% or 101%. Where tables and graphics do not match exactly to the text in the report this occurs due to the way in which figures are rounded up (or down) when responses are combined.

Multi-variate analysis approaches were also used in analysing the results. A full technical report, detailing Key Driver Analysis techniques, is available on request.



Department
for Education

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Reference: DFE- RR325

ISBN: 978-1-78105-315-7

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