



Department  
for Education

# **A survey of customers who contacted the Department for Education with regard to a complaint about a school: Year 3**

**Research Report**

**February 2016**

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## Background and Method

A customer survey was undertaken among complainants who contacted the Department for Education (the department) with a complaint about a school to explore their experience and satisfaction with the service. This report summarises the results for the third year of the survey, which covers the period from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2014 to 31<sup>st</sup> July 2015.

In total, 243 contacts were sent to BMG for the survey, and after checking and cleaning, 190 usable contacts were available.

A short questionnaire was disseminated among complainants referred back to the local school complaints process, henceforth referred to as 'first stage' respondents. A longer questionnaire was disseminated among complainants whose complaint was considered by the School Complaints Unit (SCU), Education Funding Agency (EFA) or other divisions, henceforth referred to as 'full complaint' respondents.

The method applied was largely the same as that applied at the end of Year 1 and 2. The questionnaires used in Year 3 were identical to Year 1 and 2. Where complainants had provided an email address to the department, the initial invite to take part in the survey was by email and the survey was administered online. Where only a postal address was held, or the respondent did not reply after two reminders by email, the questionnaire was administered by post.

Fieldwork took place between 9<sup>th</sup> November 2015 and 15<sup>th</sup> January 2016. Three e-mail reminders and one postal reminder were issued following the initial mailings. In the latter half of fieldwork, BMG research staff contacted non respondents by telephone where a telephone number was available, reminding them to complete the survey and undertaking a small number of interviews (5) by phone on request.

As mentioned earlier, the final number of customers invited to take part, after BMG removed any ineligible cases was 190. A total of 63 completed surveys were received, generating a response rate of 33% overall (not adjusted for any respondents gone away or not contactable on the details they provided).

The department received approximately 4,500 queries about complaints in the year surveyed, but overwhelming of these, most received a response from the department's correspondence teams as they did not meet the criteria for further consideration. Only complainants who had any part of their complaint considered by SCU, EFA or policy divisions were included in the survey. As a result of this full stage respondents (i.e. those completing the full SCU/EFA process) made up a larger proportion of complainants to the department in Year 3 (69%) compared to Year 2 (10%) and Year 1 (14%), and this is reflected in the sample achieved through the survey: 73% of Year 3 respondents are full stage, compared to 11% in Year 2 and 17% in Year 1.

More detail on numbers mailed out to and returned from each respondent type is provided in the Technical Appendix.

The findings of this survey are reported as unweighted data and so it is important to take account of variations when interpreting findings that compare total samples. For example, when looking at comparisons of Year 3 against Years 1 and 2, it is useful to be aware of the increased proportion of full stage respondents in the Year 3 sample compared to the previous years, as set out elsewhere in this report.

It should be noted that with any survey among complainants, the outcome of the complaint (whether successful or not) often has a bearing on the findings. Generally respondents who have experienced a positive outcome are more satisfied with the overall process than those who have experienced a negative outcome.

## Context

It is important to note that respondents to this survey differ from standard 'customer satisfaction' research participants for a number of reasons. Firstly, they are characterised by an often extreme strength of feeling on the topics that they seek a service in relation to. Most complainants to the department are parents; their complaint concerns treatment of their child(ren), and involves sensitive issues including bullying, Special Educational Needs, and perceived school misconduct. Secondly, where the department refers the complainant back to the school, the respondent often considers that the department has not provided them with a service, irrespective of this being the department's duty. Therefore, gathering feedback on aspects of service can be problematic. Further, even where a complaint is fully considered and the customer receives an outcome from the department, the customer may still consider that they have not received an outcome since the outcome may not (yet) have led to a change impacting their personal circumstances or those of their child. This is reflected in the finding that, among the 51 full complaint respondents (i.e. who have received an outcome) in Year 3, 17% consider their complaint resolved but a larger 41% consider their complaint to be ongoing.

This report contains a small number of comparisons of findings across Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3, where differences appear significant.

To put some of the findings in context, the department made the following changes in 2014:

- Restructured fortnightly team meetings to focus upon performance and continuous improvement.
- Introduced a live case tracker spreadsheet which case managers update daily, establishing the number of live cases, stage, age and ownership.
- Introduced Case Conferencing and a streamlined approach to decision quality-checking.

- Began sending shorter, summarised decision reports to customers, to increase accessibility and speed up the decision-writing process.
- Increased the use of telephones: First stage cases have been handed to the National Helpline to respond using the telephone. This aims to increase clarity on the need to exhaust the local process and enables staff to ask questions and provide guidance to complainants.
- Reviewed the end-to-end process and changed letter templates.



# Summary of Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis

## Key Drivers of Satisfaction

The multi-variate approach used (random forest) is described fully in a technical appendix available on request. The analysis was only undertaken among full complaint respondents, given that first stage respondents are no longer asked the overall satisfaction question.

The analysis indicates that this year, across all full complaint respondents who completed a survey, the strongest predictor of satisfaction was being **confident that staff did their best to help**<sup>1</sup> whereby those most confident had higher overall levels of satisfaction. Other strong predictors of satisfaction include being confident that the consideration of their complaint was fair and impartial and being confident that they were taken seriously.

In comparison to last year, the same top ten aspects were considered the strong predictors of satisfaction with only one exception. This year timeliness of case manager communications rose from 18<sup>th</sup> position to 10<sup>th</sup> position, whilst the case manager being same throughout the process fell to 15<sup>th</sup> position.

## 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 among full complaint respondents was 3.2 (rounded to the nearest decimal place).

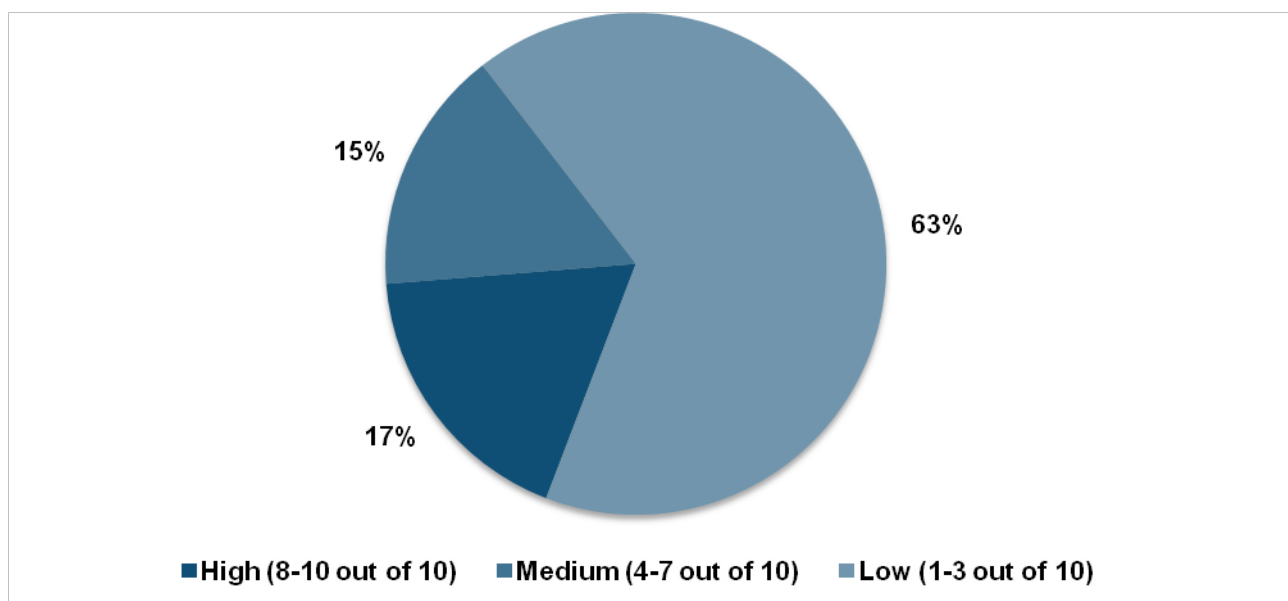
Just under two thirds, or 63%, were dissatisfied overall (rating between 1 and 3 out of 10), 17% were satisfied (rating between 8 and 10 out of 10) and 15% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (rating between 4 and 7 out of 10).

Whilst not significant, the data suggests that full complainants are more satisfied in Year 3 than in earlier years (17% compared to 6% in Year 2 and 9% in Year 1).

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<sup>1</sup> In the questionnaire this is question Q14h.

**Figure 1: Satisfaction with the overall service provided by the department (full complaint respondents)**



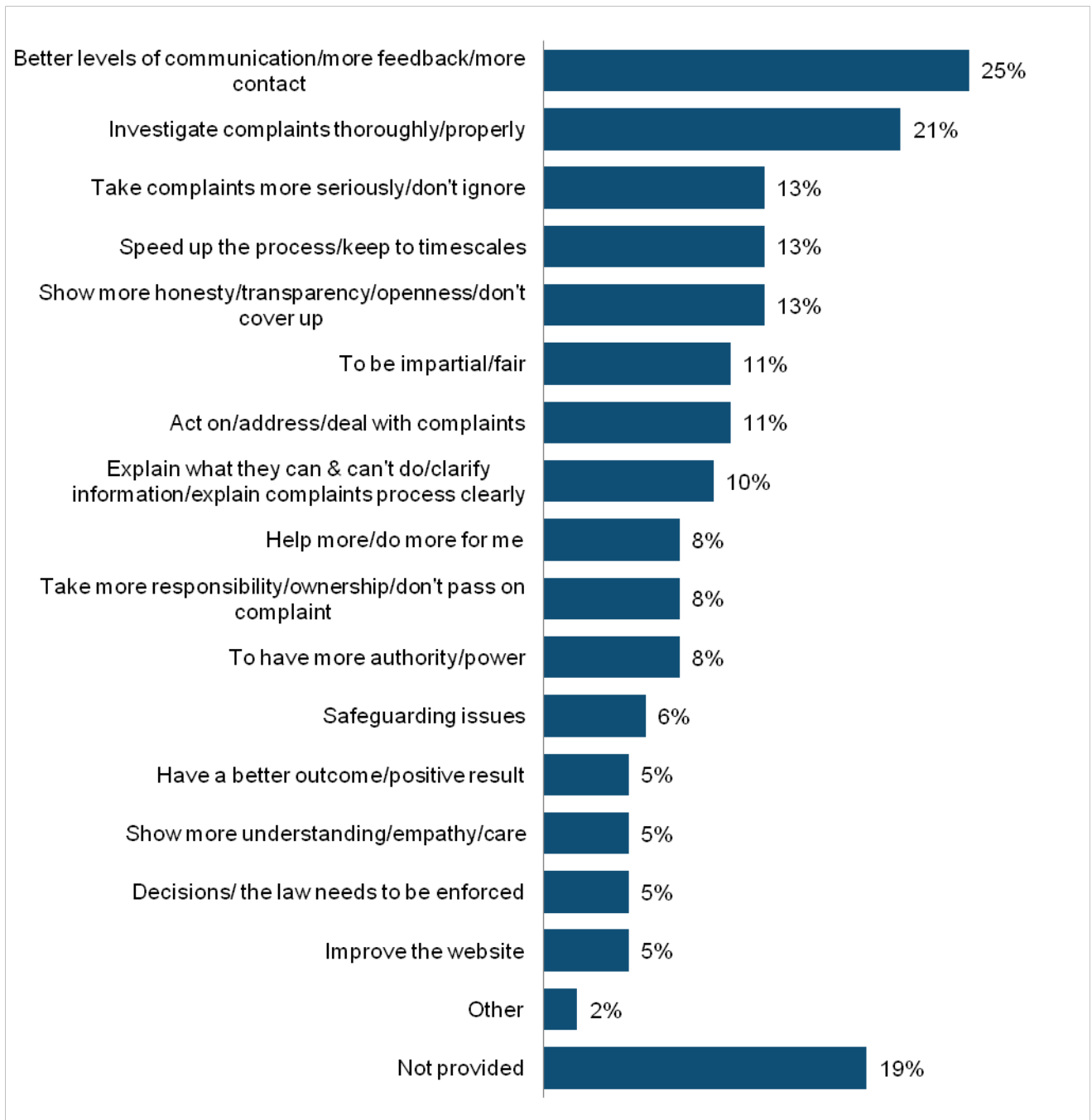
Sample base: Full complaint respondents (46)

All respondents were asked to describe how the department could make them more satisfied with the service for making complaints about a school. Responses suggested that there is demand among customers 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 (25%), in addition to acting on or investigating complaints thoroughly (21%). Other sizeable proportions mentioned taking complaints more seriously (13%), speeding up the process/keeping to timescales (13%) or showing more honesty/transparency (13%).

In Year 3 better communication (25% compared to 14% in Year 2 and 17% in Year 1), investigating complaints thoroughly (21% compared to 6% in Year 2 and 7% in Year 1) and showing more honesty/transparency (13% compared to 2% in Year 2 and 2% in Year 1) were more popular suggestions for improvement than in earlier surveys.

Full complainants were more likely to mention better communication (30% compared to 12% of first stage respondents) and investigating complaints thoroughly (26% compared to 6% of first stage respondents), whilst first stage respondents were more likely to mention taking complaints more seriously (35% compared to 4% of full complainants), acting on complaints (18% compared to 9% of full complainants) and showing more honesty/transparency (18% compared to 11% of full complainants).

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



Sample base: All respondents (63).

Sample base: All respondents (63). 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 5% or more respondents.

19% gave no comment on what could be improved.

The survey looked at satisfaction with different aspects of service in more detail for full complaint respondents, since these have had most contact with the service. When asked to consider aspects of service from the case manager specifically, respondents expressed most satisfaction with the use of appropriate communication formats, 33% being satisfied and 53% either satisfied or neutral<sup>2</sup>. This compares with 44% who were satisfied or neutral in respect of having the same case manager throughout or a well-managed transition if there was a change of case manager; 37% who were satisfied or neutral concerning being kept informed on progress/requirements; and 32% who were satisfied or neutral about the case manager understanding the desired outcome.

Full complaint respondents were also asked to rate their satisfaction with the communications received from their case manager<sup>3</sup> across seven aspects: timeliness, transparency, accurate reflection of the complaint, clarity, politeness, professionalism, and tone. In each case they also rated the importance of this aspect.

On a positive note the overall quality of communications was scored fairly highly in terms of satisfaction, and this is one of the most important aspects also. However, in terms of other important aspects (i.e. accurate reflection and transparency) satisfaction levels were much lower and indicate a gap in expectations.

## **Willingness to Advocate the Service to Others**

To explore advocacy of the service, all respondents were asked how they would speak to other people about the department and how it handles school complaints. As shown in Figure 3, 43% would be critical without being asked, 24% if they were asked, such that 67% (accounting for rounding) would be critical of the department overall. 14% would be neutral while 11% would speak highly about the department and how it handles school complaints (without being asked).<sup>4</sup>

5% were unsure or had no opinion here.

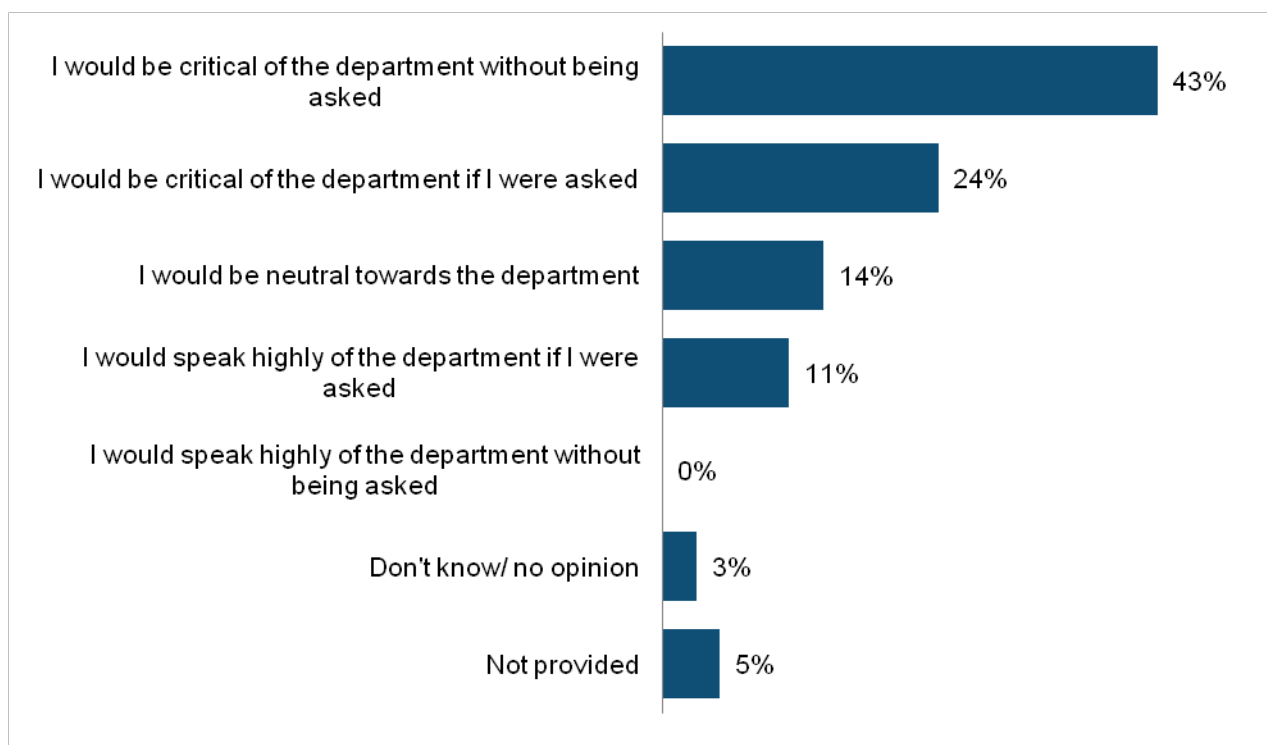
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<sup>2</sup> Those rating 4-10 out of 10 in terms of satisfaction.

<sup>3</sup> Staff member allocated to a complainant where the complaint is being considered by the department.

<sup>4</sup> Please note that these findings are shown in summarised format in Figure 8 later in this report. Figure 8 combines these responses into three bandings (speak highly/neutral/critical) and also compares full and first stage complainants against each other.

**Figure 3: Advocacy of the service (all respondents)**



Sample base: All respondents (63).

The proportion of respondents who would speak highly of the department (irrespective of whether asked or not) was slightly higher in Year 3 (11% compared to 7% in Year 2 and 8% in Year 1). However, these differences are not statistically significant.

Full complainants (15%) were more likely to say they would speak highly of the department than first stage respondents (0%). In contrast, first stage respondents (76%) were more likely to be critical of the department than full complainants (63%).

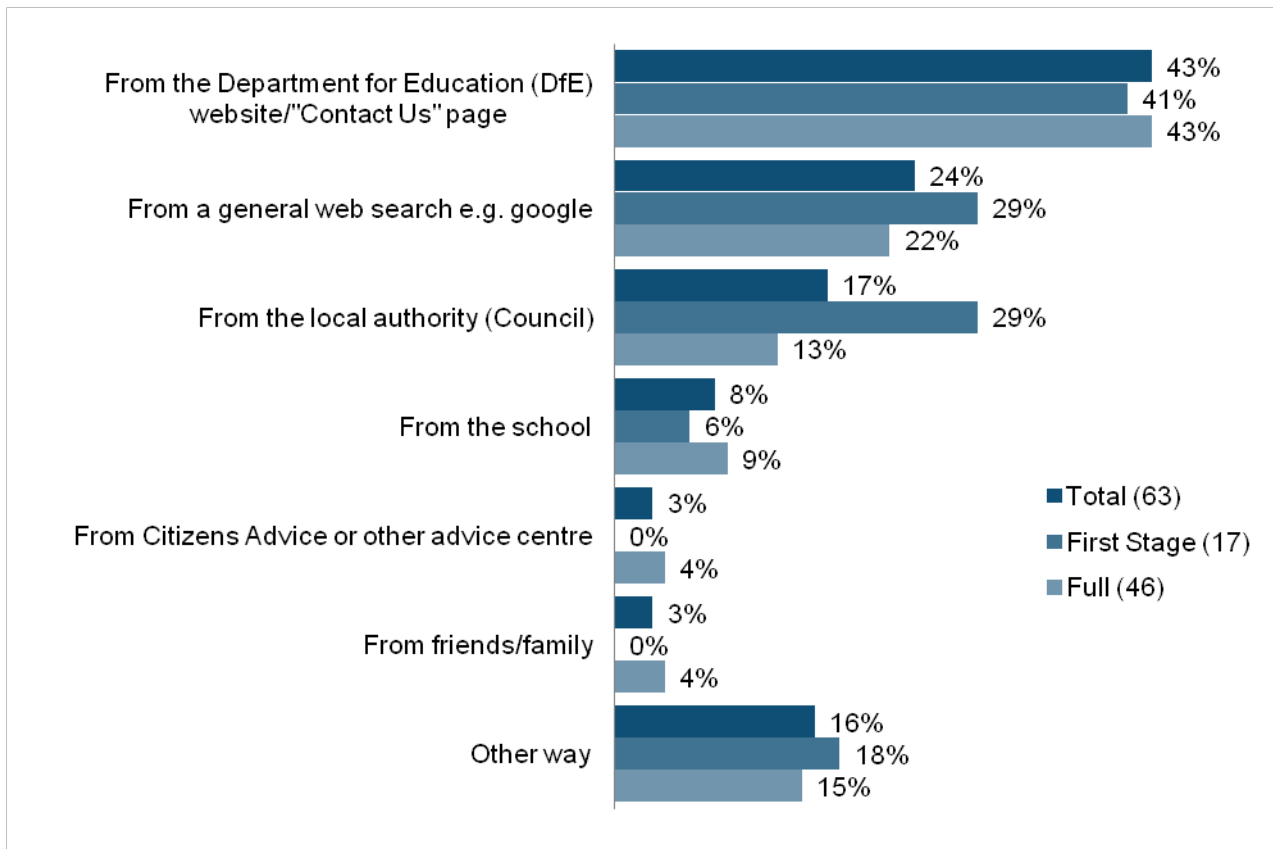
Whilst there are few differences in the figures comparing Year 3 to the previous years' data, those who would speak highly of the department if asked has significantly increased (12% in Year 3, 5% in Year 2 and 7% in Year 1).

## Making Contact

For 81% of respondents, this was their first complaint (71% of first stage and 85% of full complaints). 13% had made one previous complaint and 5% had made two or more previous complaints. 2% could not recall. This question related to separate complaints, not contact about the same one. The number of respondents who had made one previous complaint is significantly higher in Year 3 (13%) than Year 2 (7%) or Year 1 (5%).

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 (43%) and from a general web search (24%). Third most likely was from the local authority (17%).

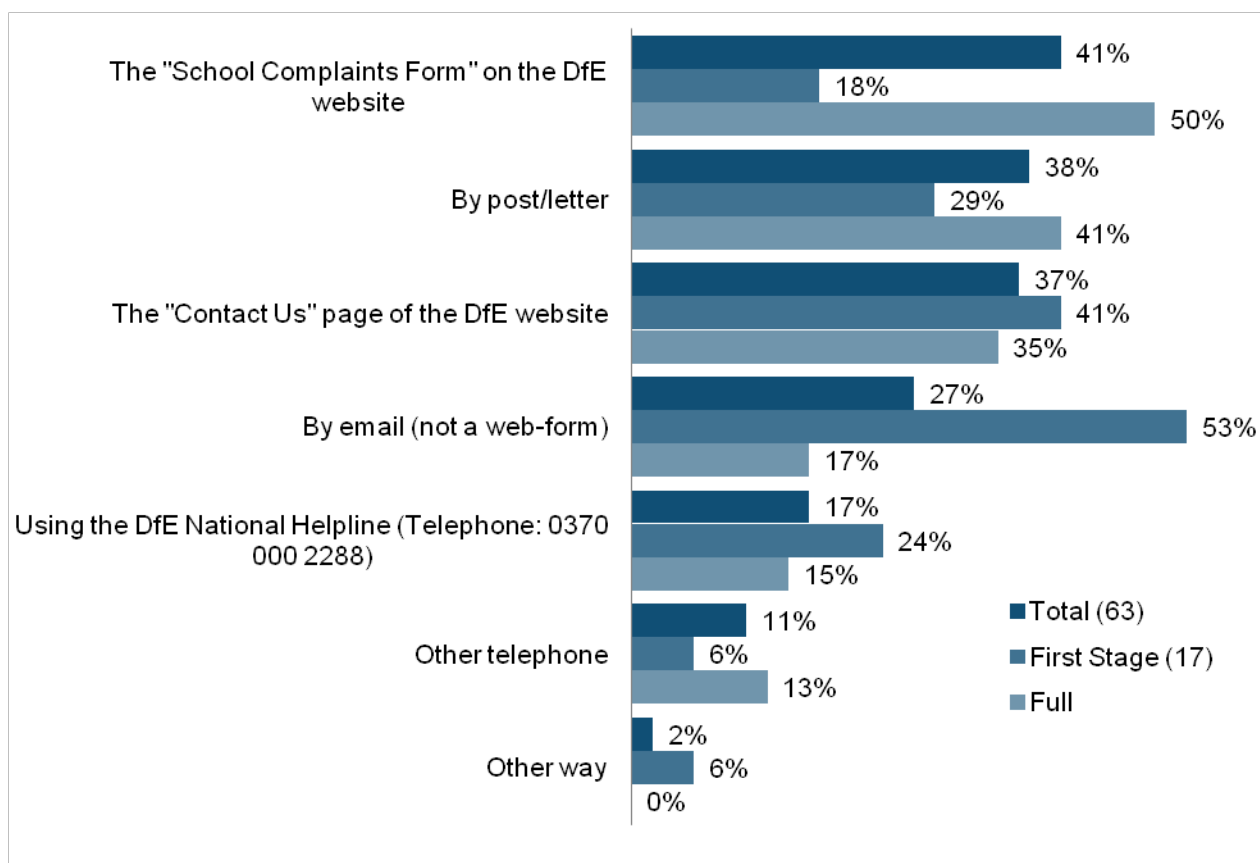
**Figure 4: How first found out about how to make a complaint (all respondents compared by complainant type)**



Sample base: Shown in brackets

Looking at the next step of making a complaint to the department, it is common for complainants to use multiple channels to do this. As many as 37% contacted the department via the 'Contact Us' page of the website, 38% contacted the department by post, and a further 41% did so via the School Complaints form on the website. A further 27% contacted the department via other email communication (potentially misremembering their contact via the web-form, or referring to contact with EFA), 17% said that they used the National Helpline and 11% other phone communication.

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



Sample base: Shown in brackets. The chart includes responses mentioned by 6% or more respondents.

More complainants in Year 3 mentioned the by post/letter (38% compared to 27% in Year 2 and 35% in Year 1) and the School Complaints Form (41% compared to 27% in Year 2 and 28% in Year 1).

As the above graph shows, full complainants were also more likely to mention the School Complaints Form (50%) than first stage respondents (18%), whilst first stage respondents were more likely to mention email (53%) than full complainants (17%). respectively)

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 3.8 overall (rounded to one decimal place). The mean rating was slightly but not significantly higher among full complaint respondents (4.1) than first stage respondents (3.1). Overall, 14% considered this easy, 54% difficult and 32% neither easy nor difficult.

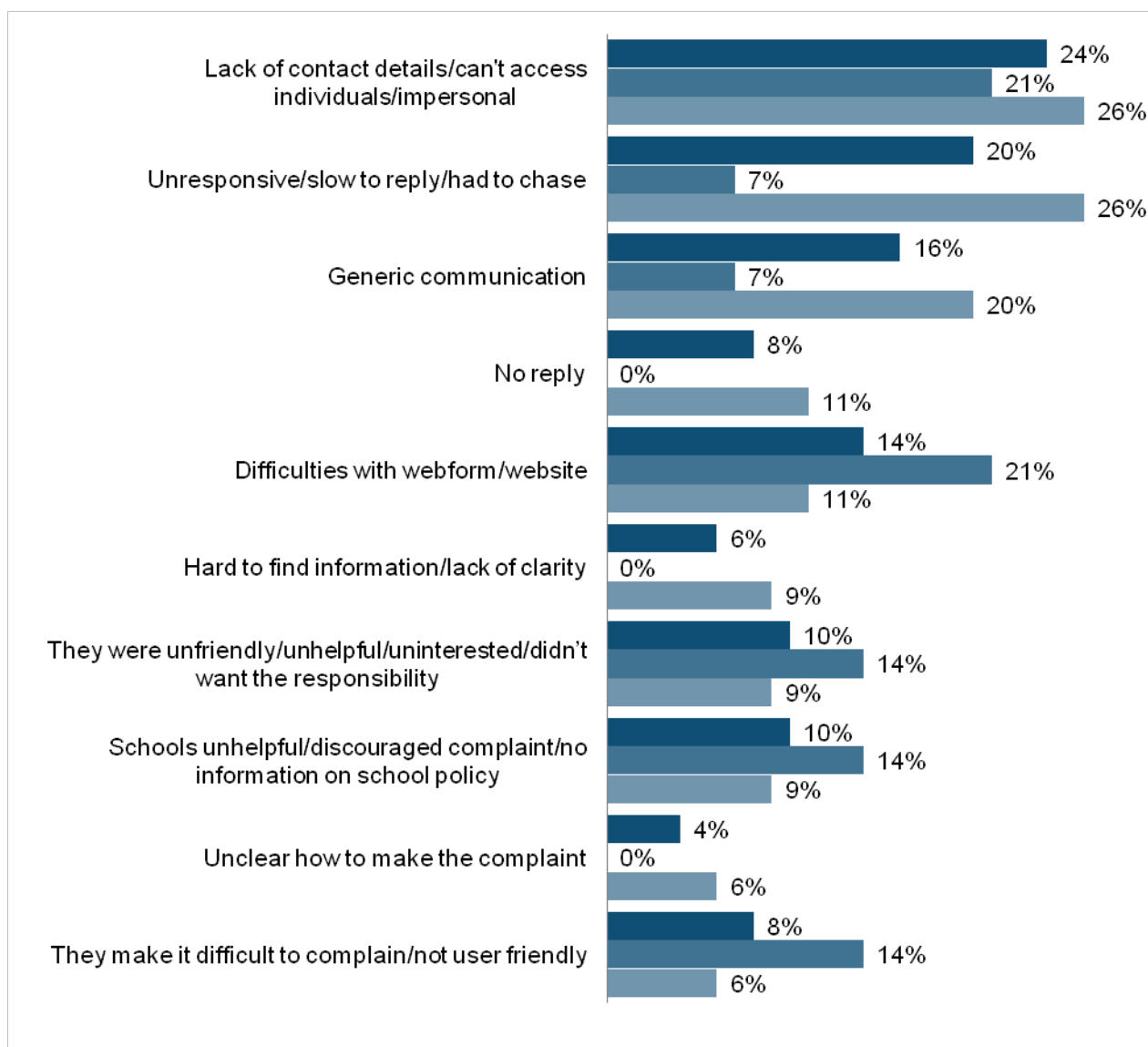
On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is very difficult and 10 is very easy, the mean rating for ease of making contact with the department was 4.5 overall, after rounding the average to one decimal place. Like last year, the results suggest that making contact is seen as very slightly easier than finding information on how to make a complaint: the rating for making contact was slightly but not significantly higher among full complaint respondents (4.7) than first stage (3.9). Overall, 22% considered it easy to make contact with the department, 41% difficult and 37% 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' (24%), followed by being unresponsive/slow to reply (20%), generic communication (16%) and difficulties with webform/website (14%).

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.

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.

# Main Report: Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

## Key Driver Analysis

Random Forest analysis was applied where appropriate to help identify the main influences on satisfaction among customers. The Random Forest technique is 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 analysis indicates that across full complaint respondents who completed a survey in Year 3, the strongest predictor of satisfaction is **confidence that staff did their best to help** (Q14h on the questionnaire). Other strong predictors of satisfaction include being confident that the consideration of their complaint was fair and impartial and being confident that they were taken seriously.

In comparison to last year, the same top ten aspects were considered the strong predictors of satisfaction with only one exception. This year timeliness of case manager communications rose from 18<sup>th</sup> position to 10<sup>th</sup> position, whilst the case manager being same throughout the process fell to 15<sup>th</sup> position.

The relative 'influence' of the different variables across these samples is summarised in the Figures 7 and 8 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.

The zero point is important in that above this variables are considered to be important predictors of satisfaction, while at zero and below they are not. Thus the variables in bold text in Figure 7 are an influence on satisfaction, while the variables not in bold are not an influence according to this analysis.

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.

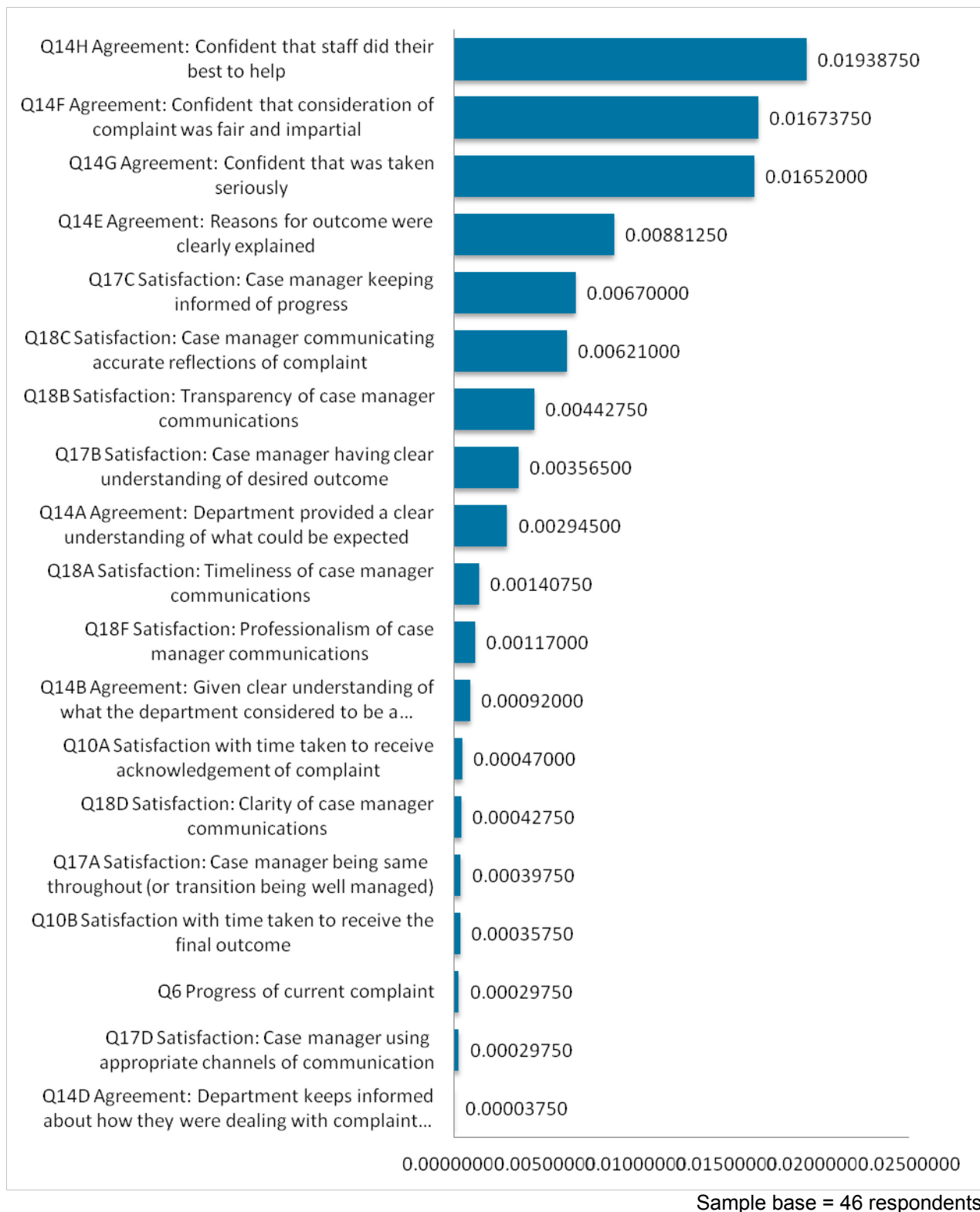
More detail on the technical aspects of the Random Forest analysis undertaken is available as a Technical Appendix.

**Figure 7: Relative influence of variables identified as influential on satisfaction using 'Random Forest' driver analysis (full complaint respondents): ALL VARIABLES**

Q14H Agreement: Confident that staff did their best to help	0.01938750	Important variables
Q14F Agreement: Confident that consideration of complaint was fair and impartial	0.01673750	
Q14G Agreement: Confident that was taken seriously	0.01652000	
Q14E Agreement: Reasons for outcome were clearly explained	0.00881250	
Q17C Satisfaction: Case manager keeping informed of progress	0.00670000	
Q18C Satisfaction: Case manager communicating accurate reflections of complaint	0.00621000	
Q18B Satisfaction: Transparency of case manager communications	0.00442750	
Q17B Satisfaction: Case manager having clear understanding of desired outcome	0.00356500	
Q14A Agreement: Department provided a clear understanding of what could be expected	0.00294500	
Q18A Satisfaction: Timeliness of case manager communications	0.00140750	
Q18F Satisfaction: Professionalism of case manager communications	0.00117000	
Q14B Agreement: Given clear understanding of what the department considered to be a complaint	0.00092000	
Q10A Satisfaction with time taken to receive acknowledgement of complaint	0.00047000	
Q18D Satisfaction: Clarity of case manager communications	0.00042750	
Q17A Satisfaction: Case manager being same throughout (or transition being well managed)	0.00039750	
Q10B Satisfaction with time taken to receive the final outcome	0.00035750	
Q6 Progress of current complaint	0.00029750	
Q17D Satisfaction: Case manager using appropriate channels of communication	0.00029750	Unimportant variables
Q14D Agreement: Department keeps informed about how they were dealing with complaint and what was required from complainant	0.00003750	
Q2 Whether made complaint via DfE National Helpline	0.00000000	
Q2 Whether made complaint via telephone	0.00000000	
Q2 Whether made complaint via e-mail	0.00000000	
Q3 Number of complaints previously made	0.00000000	
Q8 Dealt with EFA	0.00000000	
Q8 Dealt with MPCD	0.00000000	
Q8 Dealt with Ministers	0.00000000	
Q8 Dealt with Policy Division	0.00000000	
Q8 Dealt with other team or department	0.00000000	
Q8 Dealt with SCU	-0.00000250	
Q18G Satisfaction: Tone of case manager communications	-0.00000500	
Q2 Whether made complaint by post	-0.00001750	
Q2 Whether made complaint via 'Contact Us' on DfE website	-0.00002000	
Q9A Time taken to receive acknowledgement of complaint	-0.00002000	
Q9B Time taken to receive the final outcome	-0.00003250	
Q12 Sufficiency of the amount of contact with the department in relation to the complaint	-0.00004000	
Q2 Whether made complaint via schools complaint form on DfE website	-0.00006000	
Q4_2 Ease of making contact with the department	-0.00008000	
Q4_1 Ease of finding information about how to make a school complaint	-0.00008250	
Q18E Satisfaction: Politeness of case manager communications	-0.00011250	
Q14C Agreement: Given clear understanding of the time the process may take	-0.00012000	

Sample base = 46 respondents

**Figure 8: Relative influence of variables identified as influential on satisfaction using 'Random Forest' driver analysis (full complaint respondents): ALL VARIABLES WITH AN INFLUENCE ON SATISFACTION**



## First Stage Respondents

### Sample Overview and Complaint Context

#### Sample profile overview

The vast majority of first stage respondents were parents (94%), leaving 6% that were other categories.

Just over one in ten (12%) of first stage respondents were male, and 82% female. 6% declined to respond.

Just 6% of first stage respondents were aged 16 to 24 years, 12% were 25 to 34 and 24% 35 to 44, 29% were 45 to 54 and 18% 55 to 64, with 0% aged 65 years or older (12% not providing a response here).

24% of first stage respondents described themselves as having a disability. 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

Four in ten first stage respondents had found out about how to make a complaint from the department's 'Contact Us' page (41%), with about three in ten each via a general internet search (29%) and the local authority (29%). Others mentioned the school (6%), and other ways (18%), which included Ofsted and parent partnerships.

Looking at access into the service, more than half of first stage respondents used email (53%), about four in ten used the department's 'Contact Us' page (41%), while three in ten contacted the department by post (29%). About a quarter used the department's National Helpline (24%) and just under one in five used the School Complaints Form on the department's website (18%). 11% considered they had contacted the department via another telephone channel.

For example, among those known to have contacted the department through some online means, 45% specified that they had used the 'Contact Us' webpage, 32% the 'School Complaints Form' and 28% another email<sup>5</sup>, but also 12% considered that they had sent a letter and 6% had used the National Helpline.

Like previous years it was common to have used multiple channels of access into the service. However, in Year 3 first stage respondents were more likely to mention email (53% compared to 24% in Year 2 and 20% in Year 1) and the DfE National Helpline (24% compared to 9% in Year 2 and 11% in Year 1).

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<sup>5</sup> Other email addresses are not publicised so this may figure may include emails that respondents have mis-sent to other parties, or it may refer to emails to the EFA service.

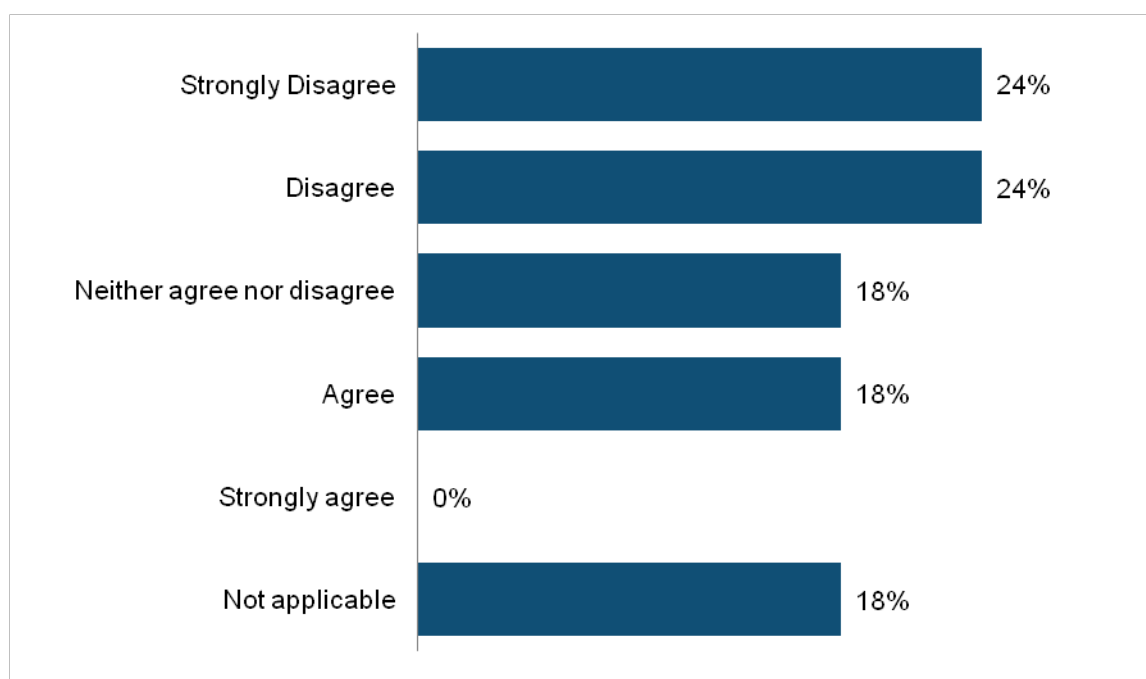
Respondents were asked to use a scale of 1 to 10 to rate ease of finding information on how to make a complaint to the department about a school, and ease of making contact with the department. Ease of finding information on how to make a complaint was rated at 3.1 out of 10 by first stage respondents (when the average is rounded to one decimal place). In percentage terms, 65% rated ease of finding information on how to make a complaint as difficult (1-3 out of 10), 6% as easy (8-10 out of 10) and 29% as neither/nor (4-7 out of 10). Slightly higher rated was ease of making contact, at 3.9 on average. This reflected 53% who rated making contact as difficult, 18% as easy and 29% as neither/nor.

The two main reasons given by first stage respondents for finding it difficult to make contact were the difficulties with webform/website (21%) and the awkward procedure (21%). Other reasons included unfriendly/unhelpful/uninterested staff (14%), schools being unhelpful/discouraged complaint/no information on school policy (14%) and they made it difficult to complain/not user friendly (14%).

## **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', 47% disagreed that this was the case (24% responding strongly disagree and 24% disagree). A much lower proportion (18%) agreed that it had been clearly explained (all 18% responding agree). The remaining 18% neither agreed nor disagreed (18% considered this question not applicable).

**Figure 9: 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 (17)

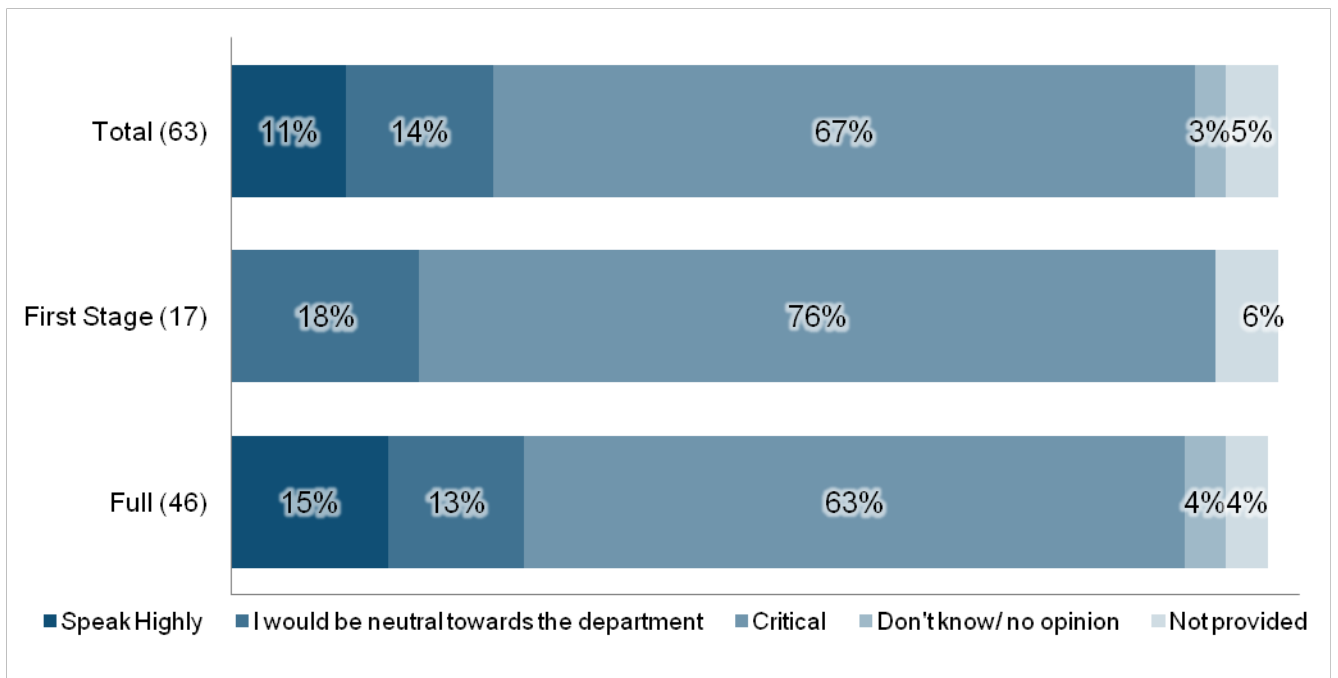
The proportion of first stage respondents who agreed was lower in Year 3 (18% compared to 27% in Year 2 and 32% in Year 1).

## Advocacy

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, 53% would be critical without being asked and 24% would be critical if they were asked. 18% would be neutral while no respondents said they would speak highly of the department whether asked or not.

This compares to 39% being critical without being asked among full complaint respondents, 24% being critical if asked, 13% neutral and 15% speaking highly if asked. Whilst these figures are not statistically significantly different due to the small sample bases, the data suggests that first stage respondents have more negative views than full complaints respondents.

**Figure 10: Advocacy: How respondents would speak to others about the department (all respondents compared by complainant type)**



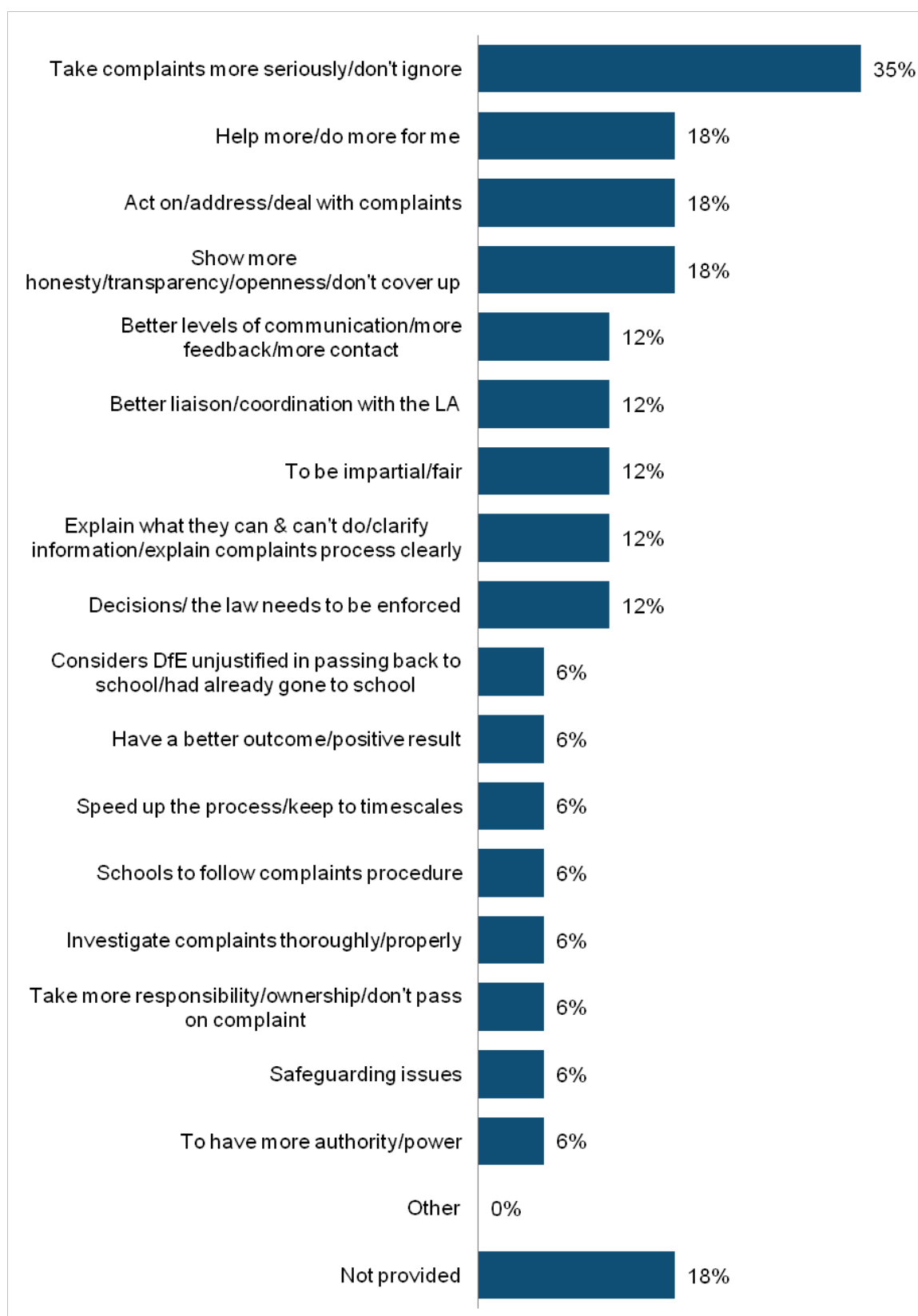
Sample base: Shown in brackets

First stage respondents suggested taking complaints more seriously (35%) should be a focal point for service improvement going forwards. Other popular suggestions included helping more (18%), acting on/addressing complaints (18%) or showing more honesty/transparency (18%). Just over one in ten also each mentioned better levels of communication (12%), better liaison/coordination (12%), being impartial (12%), explaining what they can and can't do (12%) and decisions/enforcing the law (12%).

A fuller list of coded suggestions for improving the service among first stage respondents is provided in Figure 11.



**Figure 11: Ways the department could improve satisfaction with the service – unprompted responses (first stage respondents)**



Sample base: All first stage respondents (17). The chart includes responses mentioned by 6% or more respondents.

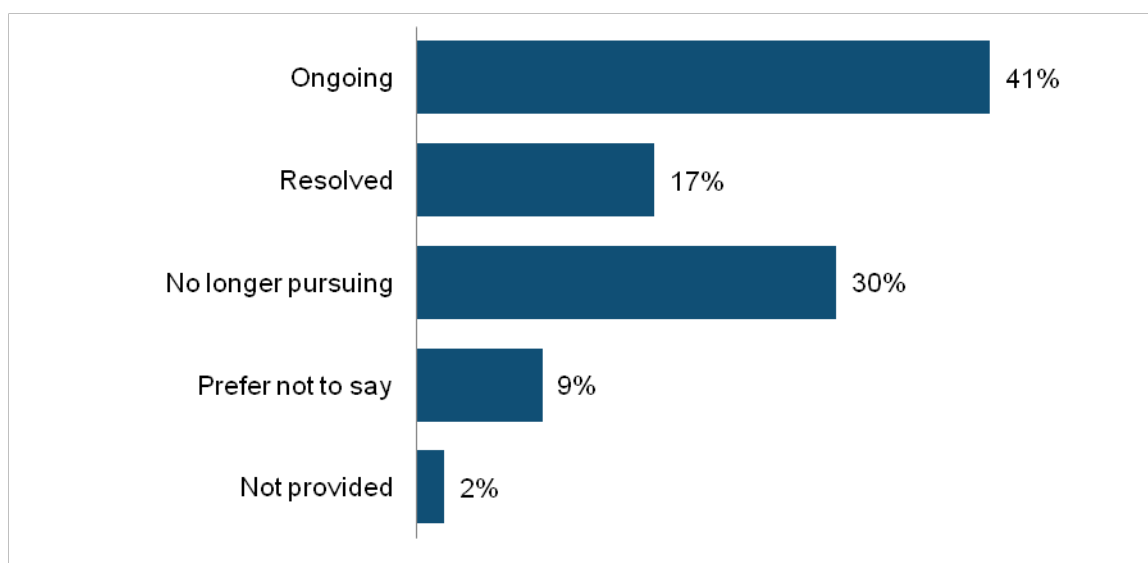
## Full Complaint Respondents

### Sample Overview and Complaint Context

#### Complaint context

Full complaint respondents were asked how they saw their complaint at the time of completing the survey, irrespective of the outcome received from the department. About four in ten (41%) considered that their complaint was ongoing. Three in ten (30%) said that they were no longer pursuing their complaint, while only 17% considered their outcome to be resolved. The remaining 11% declined to respond.

**Figure 12: Complaint status outside of the department's remit and outcome (full complaint respondents)**



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (46)

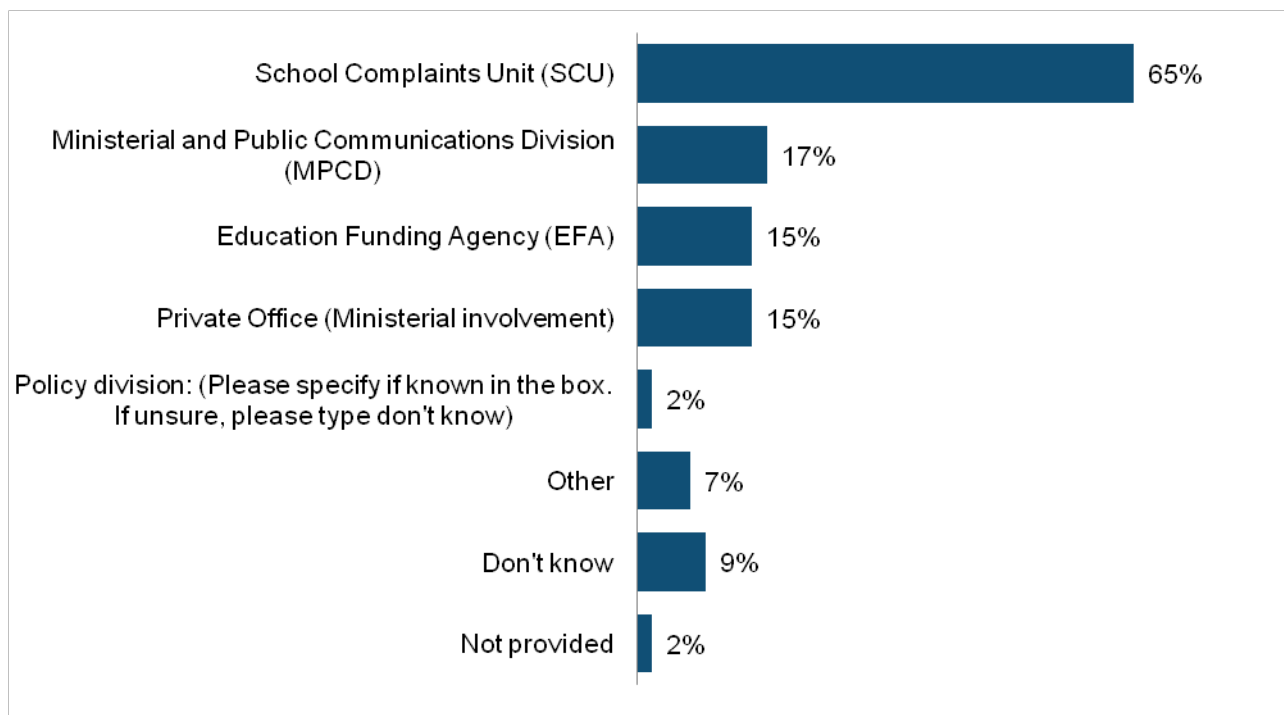
Whilst there are no significant differences between Year 3 and earlier surveys, the data suggests that those describing their complaint as ongoing has increased slightly (41% in Year 3 compared to 35% in Year 2), however the figure is similar to that in Year 1 (39%). In contrast, those describing the case as resolved has increased over time (17% in Year 3, 12% in Year 2 and 3% in Year 1).

Of the 46 full complaint respondents in the survey, 50% stated that they remembered the process of being in contact with the department very well, 39% stated quite well, 7% stated not very well, and 4% not at all 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 65% of full complaint respondents. This was followed by the Ministerial and Public Communications Division or MPCD (17%) and the Education Funding Agency (15%) and the Private Office (15%). Please note that respondents were allowed to offer multiple responses here and a small minority did so.

Responses were similar to those in earlier surveys, with the exception that Year 3 is the first time that the Private Office was mentioned.

**Figure 13: Team(s) of the department seen as involved in considering or dealing with the complaint (full complaint respondents)**



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (46)

### Sample profile overview

About three quarters of full complaint respondents were parents/guardians (76%) and 24% were other types of complainant.

Half the full complaint respondents were female (50%), while 41% were male. The remaining 9% declined to respond.

Just 4% of respondents were aged 16 to 24 years, while 11% were 25 to 34 and 26% were 35 to 44. More than four in ten (43%) fell into the 45 to 54 category, with 7% being aged 55 to 64. The remaining 9% declined to respond.

A minority of 4% of full complaint respondents considered themselves to have a disability. 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

More than four in ten (43%) 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. Almost a quarter (22%) found out from doing a general internet search. Just over a fifth (13%) found out via the local authority.

Fewer respondents mentioned other sources, including the school (9%), friends/family (4%), and Citizens Advice or another advice centre (4%) (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 channels were the 'School Complaints Form' on the DfE website (50%), via post/letter (41%) and the 'Contact Us' page of the DfE website (35%). Fewer respondents mentioned other channels, specifically email (17%), the DfE National Helpline (15%) and other telephone (13%). 2% 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 4.1, when the average is rounded to one decimal place. This broke down into 50% of respondents claiming it was difficult (1-3 out of 10), 17% easy (8-10 out of 10) and 33% neither/nor (4-7 out of 10).

Rating how easy or difficult it was to subsequently make contact with the department, respondents scored this slightly higher at an average of 4.7 out of 10. Just under four in ten (37%) found it difficult, 24% found it easy, and 39% 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

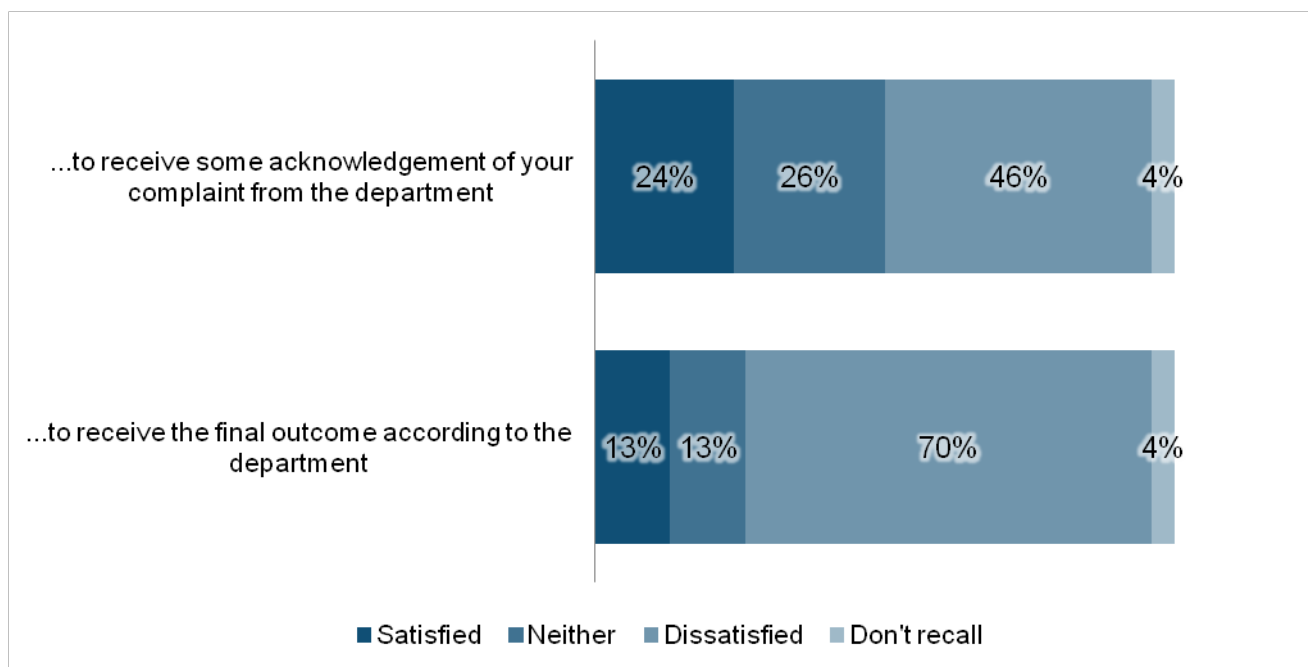
Full complaint respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the time it took to receive an acknowledgement from the department, and the time it took to receive the final outcome according to the department, using a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 is very satisfied and 1 is very dissatisfied.

The mean rating given by full complaint respondents was 4.7 out of 10 in terms of the time to receive an acknowledgement from the department and 3.1 out of 10 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 receive some acknowledgement of the complaint, 46% were dissatisfied (rating 1-3 out of 10), 26% were neutral (rating 4-7 out of 10) and 24% were satisfied (rating 8-10 out of 10).

In relation to the time to receiving a full outcome, 70% were dissatisfied (rating 1-3 out of 10), 13% were neutral (rating 4-7 out of 10) and 13% were satisfied (rating 8-10 out of 10).

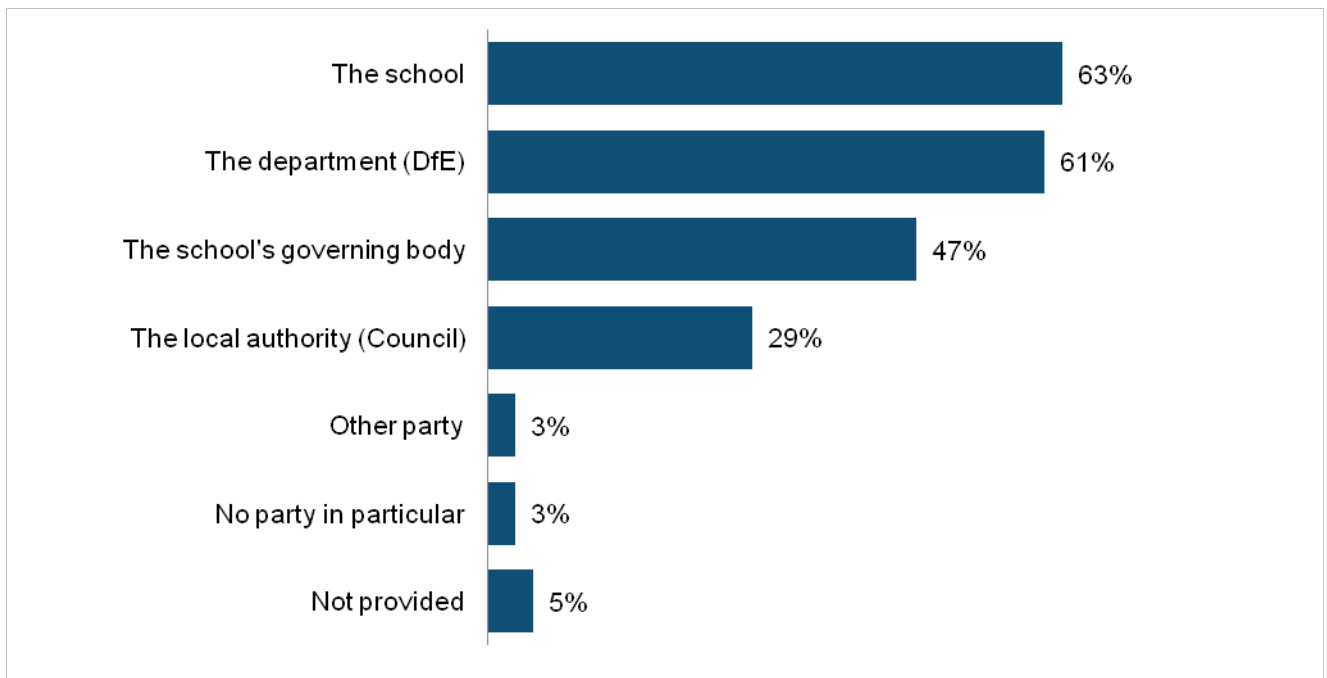
**Figure 14: Satisfaction with the length of time it took (full complaint respondents)**



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (46)

Where respondents considered that it took too long (a base of 38 respondents), 61% considered the department to be the cause of the delay. Respondents were permitted to state multiple parties. A further 63% stated the school, 47% the school's governing body, and 29% the local authority. 5% could not recall, whilst 3% said another party and 3% no party in particular.

**Figure 15: 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)**



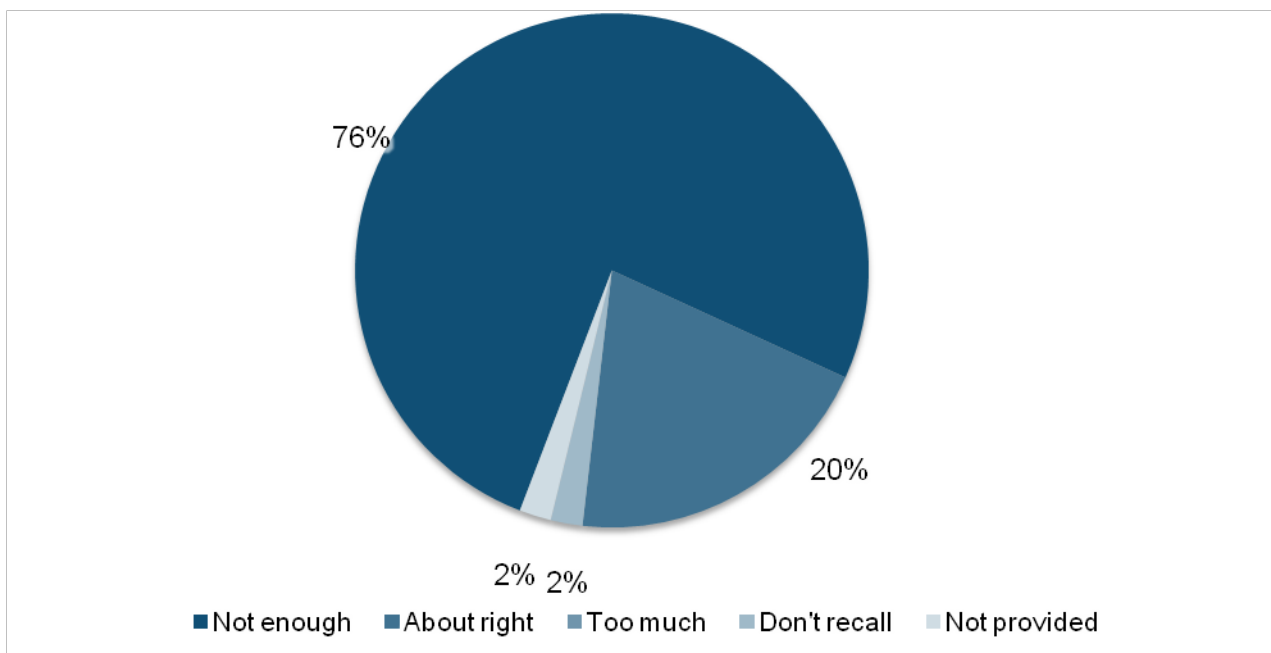
Sample base: Full complaint respondents who considered the process too long (38)

### **Other aspects of the service**

Responses from full complaint respondents suggest that they would like more contact overall from the department.

When questioned directly on this topic in the survey, 76% considered that the amount of contact they had with the department was not enough and 20% considered this about right. None of the 46 full complaint respondents considered that they had had too much contact with the department in relation to their complaint.

**Figure 16: Whether the amount of contact with the department in relation to the complaint was not enough, about right or too much (full complaint respondents)**



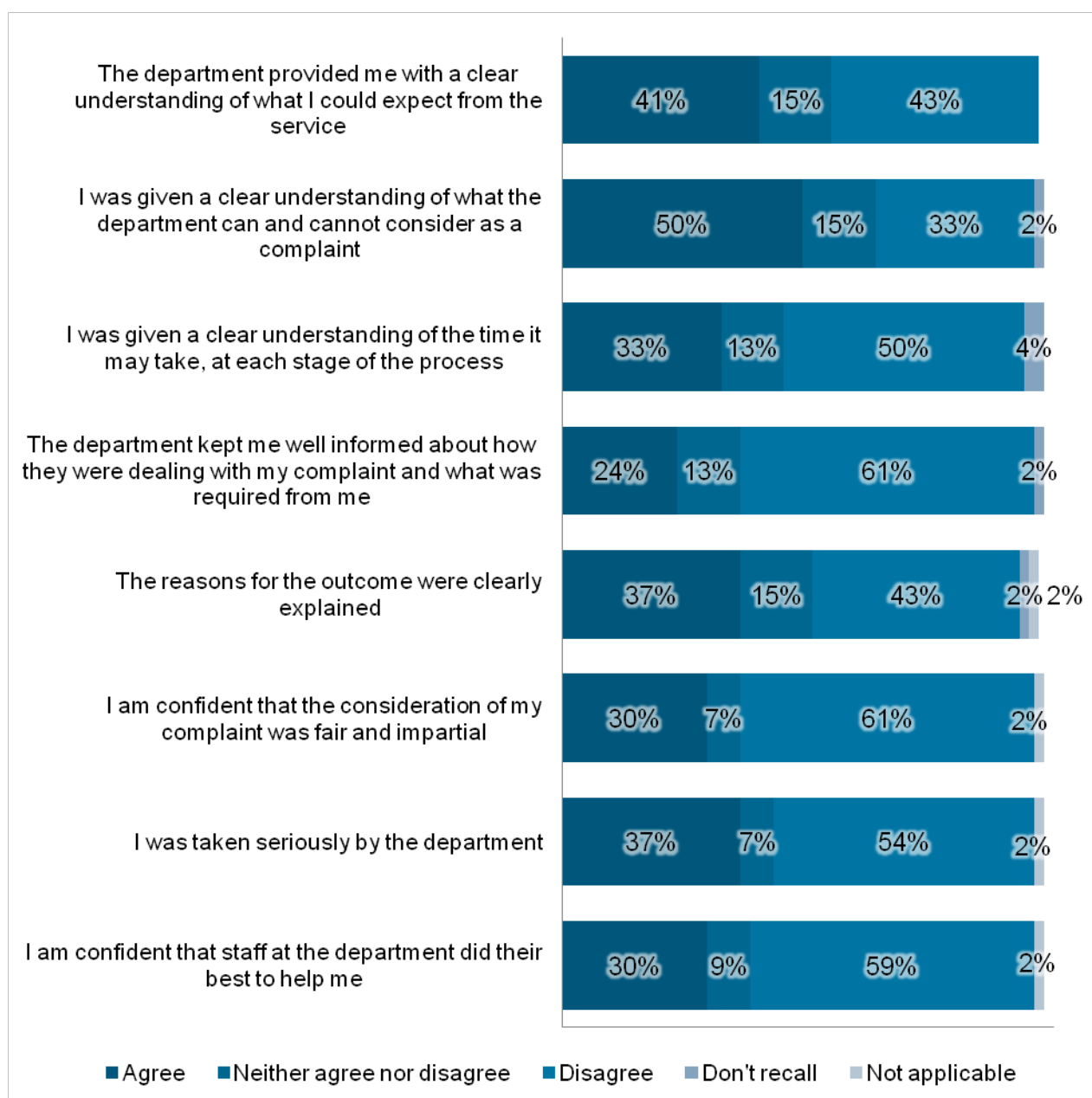
Sample base: All full complaint respondents (46)

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, as set out in Figure 17.

Comparing the ratings of aspects of service against each other, respondents were most likely to agree that they were given a clear understanding of what the department can and cannot consider as a complaint (50% agree) and what could be expected from the service (41% agree).

Disagreement levels were highest with regard to having confidence that the consideration of their complaint was fair and impartial (61% disagree), that they were kept well informed (61% disagree), and that they were confident that staff at the department did their best to help them (59% disagree).

**Figure 17: Level of agreement with statements on aspects of the service received (full complaint respondents)**



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (46)

Those who disagreed with any of the statements listed in Figure 17 above, and who therefore felt that the service provided was not satisfactory in this area, were asked to detail why. Overall, there were a variety of reasons given for each aspect of dissatisfaction including unclear explanations, inaccurate timescales, not being kept informed, limited communication overall, having to chase progress and bias towards the schools' positions.



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

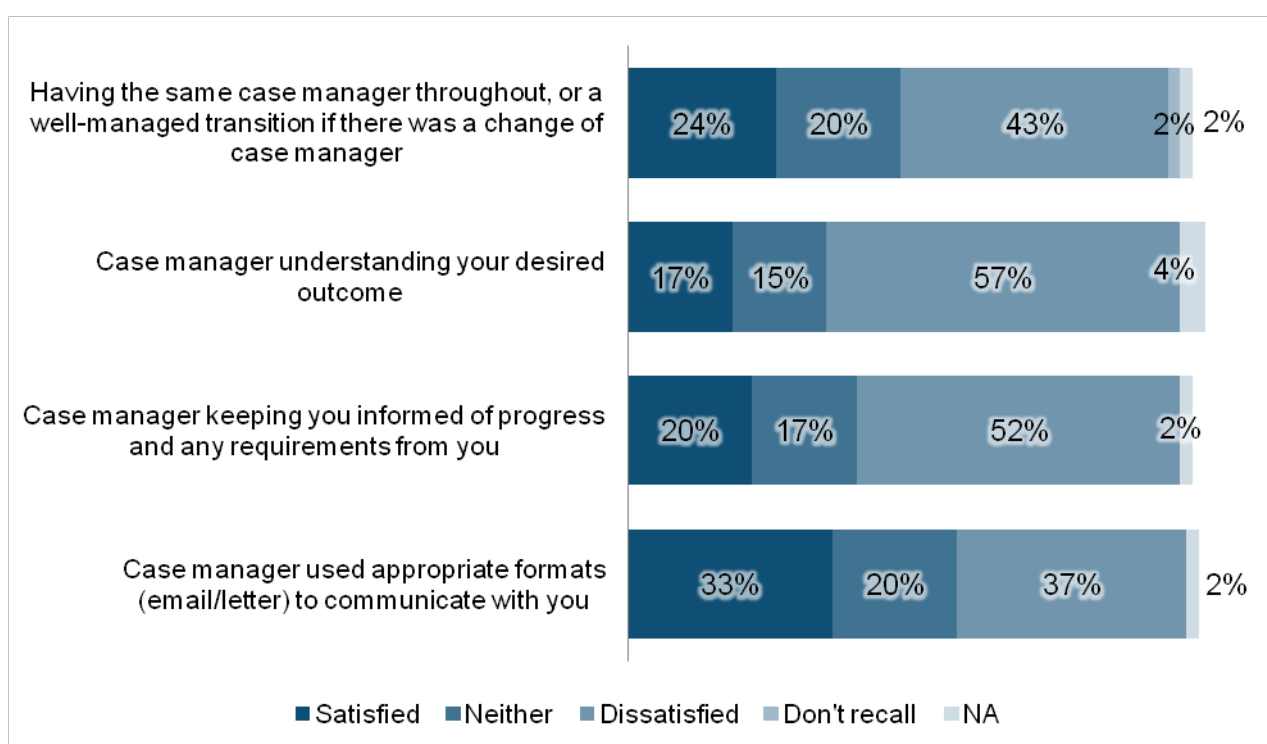
<b>Statement disagreed with CAUTION – LOW BASES</b>	<b>Reasons (responses over 10%)</b>
The department provided me with a clear understanding of what I could expect from the service (Base: 26)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information was too vague/unclear/not detailed enough (27%)</li> <li>Not informed/received no explanations/information (19%)</li> <li>Limited contact/communication (15%)</li> <li>Informed that nothing could be done (15%)</li> <li>Received no help/support (12%)</li> </ul>
I was given a clear understanding of what the department can and cannot consider as a complaint (Base: 21)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Timescales given were inaccurate (took longer) (33%)</li> <li>Was ignored (14%)</li> <li>Not informed/received no explanations/information (10%)</li> </ul>
I was given a clear understanding of the time it may take, at each stage of the process (Base: 28)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Timescales given were inaccurate (took longer) (36%)</li> <li>Did not receive outcome/was forgotten (14%)</li> <li>Information was too vague/unclear/not detailed enough (11%)</li> <li>Not informed/received no explanations/information (11%)</li> </ul>
The department kept me well informed about how they were dealing with my complaint and what was required from me (Base: 34)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not informed/received no explanations/information (24%)</li> <li>Limited contact/communication (21%)</li> <li>Had to chase them for information (21%)</li> </ul>
The reasons for the outcome were clearly explained (Base: 34)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Received unsatisfactory reasons/explanation (15%)</li> <li>Department did not understand complaint (12%)</li> </ul>
I am confident that the consideration of my complaint was fair and impartial (Base: 38)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Department was biased towards school (including cover-up) (21%)</li> <li>Department did not understand/consider case or take it seriously (18%)</li> <li>Incident wasn't fully/properly investigated (including lack of interest shown) (13%)</li> </ul>
I was taken seriously by the department (Base: 31)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incident wasn't fully/properly investigated (including lack of interest shown) (29%)</li> <li>Department was biased towards school (including cover-up) (16%)</li> <li>Department did not understand/consider case or take it seriously (16%)</li> <li>Department made me feel like a problem/unimportant/ignored (13%)</li> <li>Can't understand the reasoning behind decision/outcome contradicts evidence (10%)</li> </ul>
I am confident that staff at the department did their best to help me (Base: 29)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Department did nothing for me/no outcome (21%)</li> <li>Limited contact/communication (10%)</li> <li>Incident wasn't fully/properly investigated (including lack of interest shown) (10%)</li> <li>Department had no knowledge of the complaint (10%)</li> </ul>

Sample base: Shown in brackets

Considering different aspects of the service received from the case manager, respondents were most satisfied with use of appropriate communication formats (33% satisfied i.e. rating this 8-10 out of 10 in terms of satisfaction). There was also a relatively high level of satisfaction with having the same case manager throughout or a well-managed transition if there was a change (24% satisfied and rating this 8-10 out of 10).

However, respondents were more likely to be dissatisfied than satisfied overall, particularly in relation to the case manager's understanding of the desired outcome (57% dissatisfied, or 1-3 out of 10) and the case manager keeping complainants informed of progress and any requirements from them (52% dissatisfied).

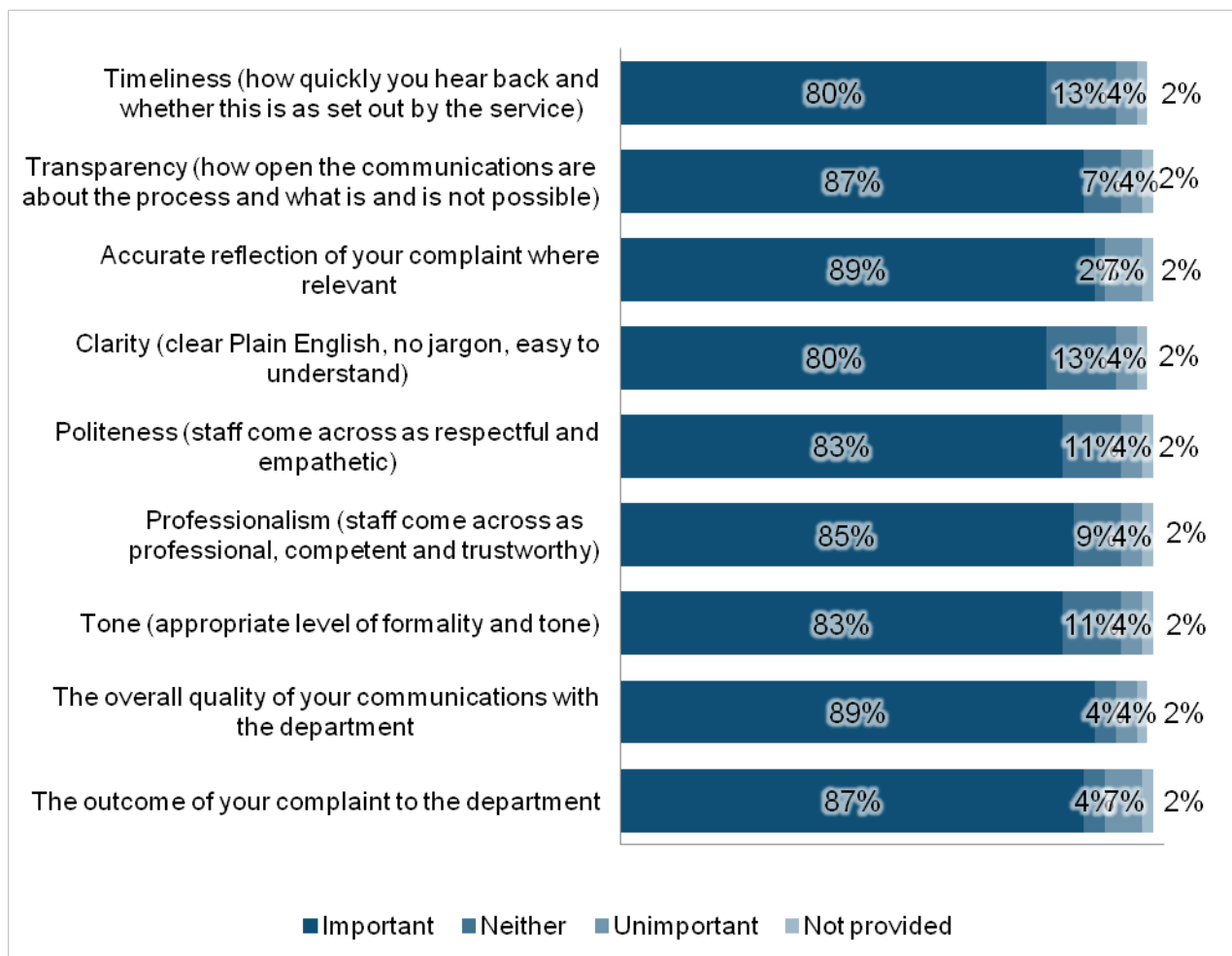
**Figure 18: Level of satisfaction with aspects of the service provided by the case manager (full complaint respondents)**



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (46)

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, full stage complainants generally rated all the aspects as important. This was particularly the case with the accuracy in reflecting the complaint (89% rating 8-10), overall quality of communications (89%), the outcome of the complaint (87%), and transparency (87%). This is followed by professionalism (85%), politeness (83%) and tone (83%). Clarity (80%) and timeliness (80%) were rated as the least important aspects of service.

**Figure 19: Perceived importance of aspects of the service (full complaint respondents)**



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (46). Note: Important denotes those rating 8-10 out of 10, neither = 4-7 out of 10, and unimportant = 1-3 out of 10

Figure 20 below shows satisfaction (ratings of 8-10 out of 10) against importance (also 8-10 out of 10) on aspects of service provided by the case manager. The ideal is for all variables to be as far right as possible (indicating strength on the satisfaction scale), and particularly those variables that are highest on the vertical scale, i.e. stated to be most important by respondents.

Overall, the department achieved the highest proportions of 'good' ratings on tone (35%), politeness (33%), overall quality (26%), professionalism (26%) and clarity (24%). All other aspects were rated as good by fewer than 20% of respondents. For example, on one of the aspects considered most important by respondents i.e. the case manager accurately reflecting the complaint, only 17% of respondents rated this aspect as good (8-10 out of 10).

Figure 20 therefore represents an opportunity for service improvement through case managers, by increasing satisfaction with how accurately they are seen to reflect the complaint as well as transparency (i.e. how open the communications are about the process and what is and is not possible).

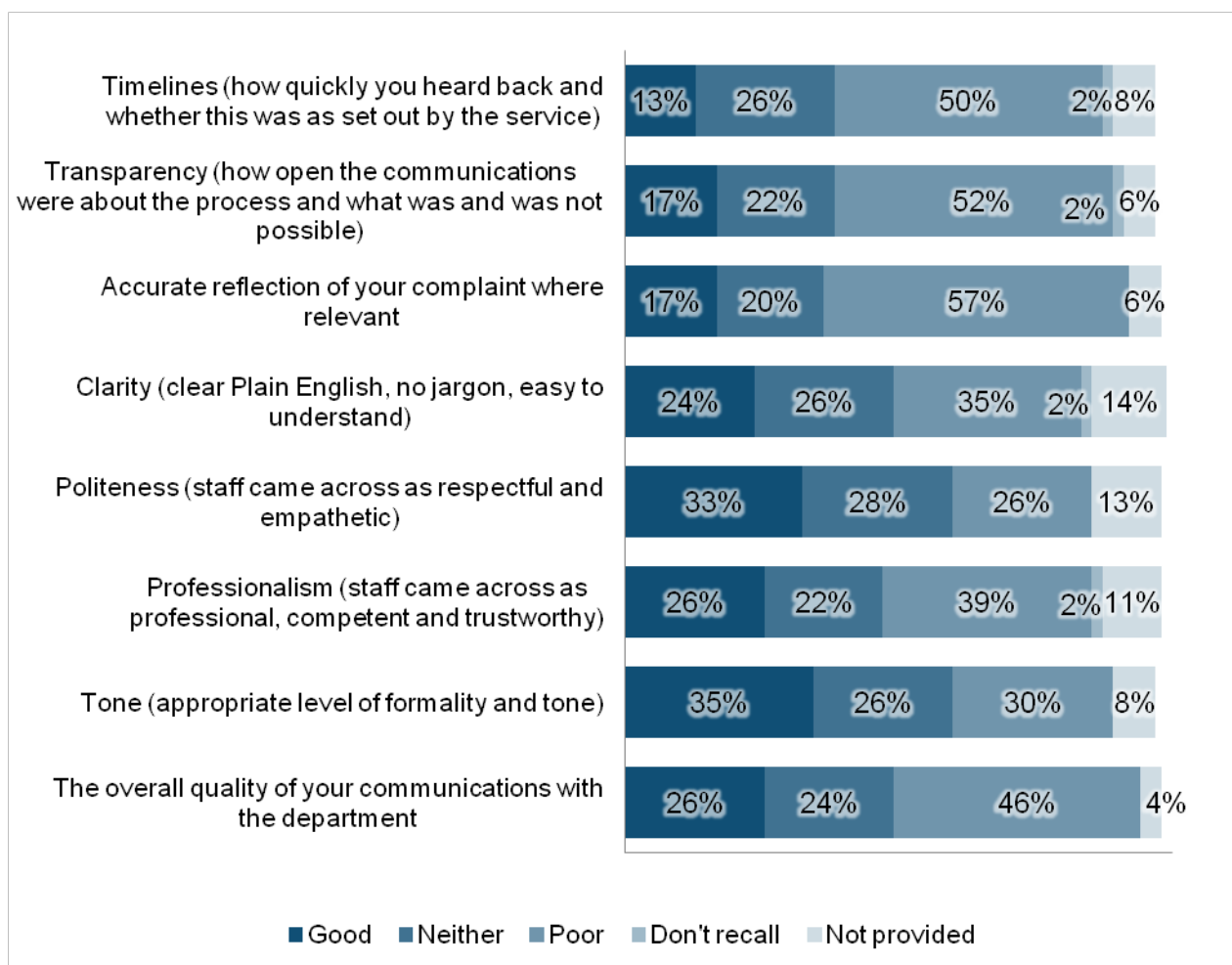
These factors are likely to impact on perceptions of the complaint being dealt with in a thorough and impartial manner (more so than timeliness or tone for example)

**Figure 20: Importance vs. Satisfaction ratings on aspects of service provided by the case manager (full complaint respondents)**



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (46). Combines Q18 & Q19, excl. outcome.

**Figure 21: Rating of the quality of communications with case manager across different aspects (full complaint respondents)**



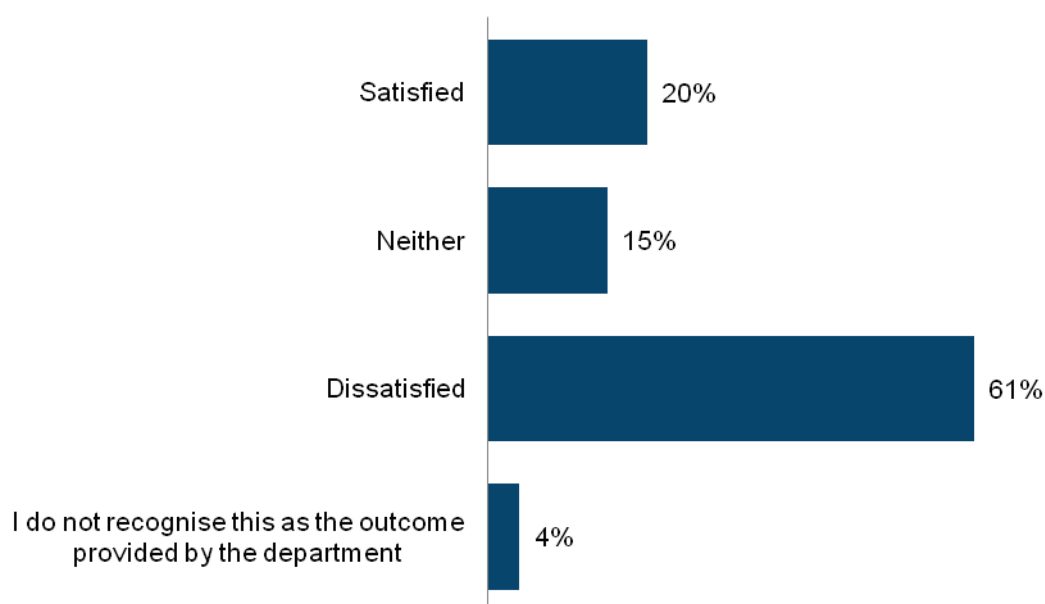
Sample base: All full complaint respondents (46)

## 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. Respondents were informed that the word outcome in this question meant 'the outcome communicated to you as upheld, partially upheld or not upheld'.

Of the 46 full complaint respondents, the mean rating was 3.3 on a scale where 1 is very dissatisfied and 10 very satisfied. 61% were dissatisfied with the outcome (giving a rating of 1-3 out of 10), 15% were neutral (rating 4-7 out of 10), and 20% were satisfied with the outcome (rating 8-10 out of 10).

**Figure 22: Satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint under the department's school complaints process (full complaint respondents)**

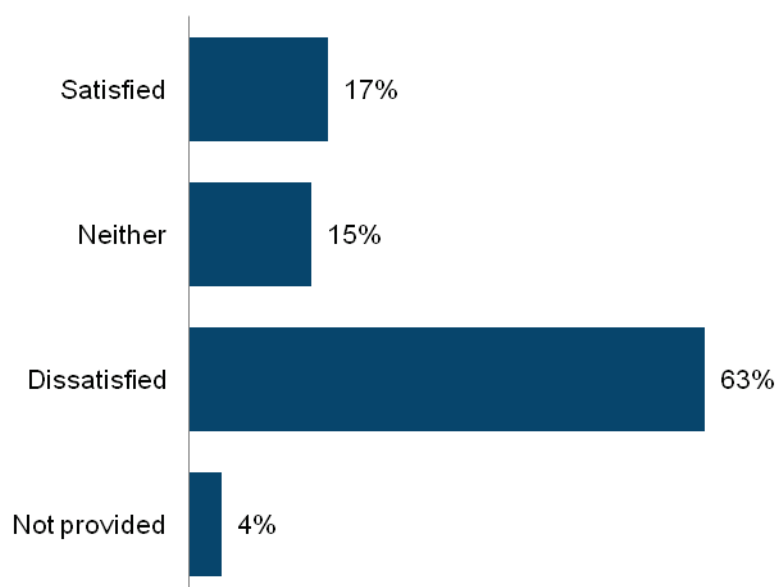


Sample base: All full complaint respondents (46)

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 3.2 (when rounded to one decimal place). As shown in Figure 23, just under two thirds (63%) were dissatisfied (1-3 out of 10), while 17% were satisfied (8-10 out of 10) and 15% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (4-7 out of 10).

Whilst not significant, the data suggests that full complainants are more satisfied in Year 3 than in earlier years (17% compared to 6% in Year 2 and 9% in Year 1).

**Figure 23: Satisfaction with the overall service provided by the department (full complaint respondents)**

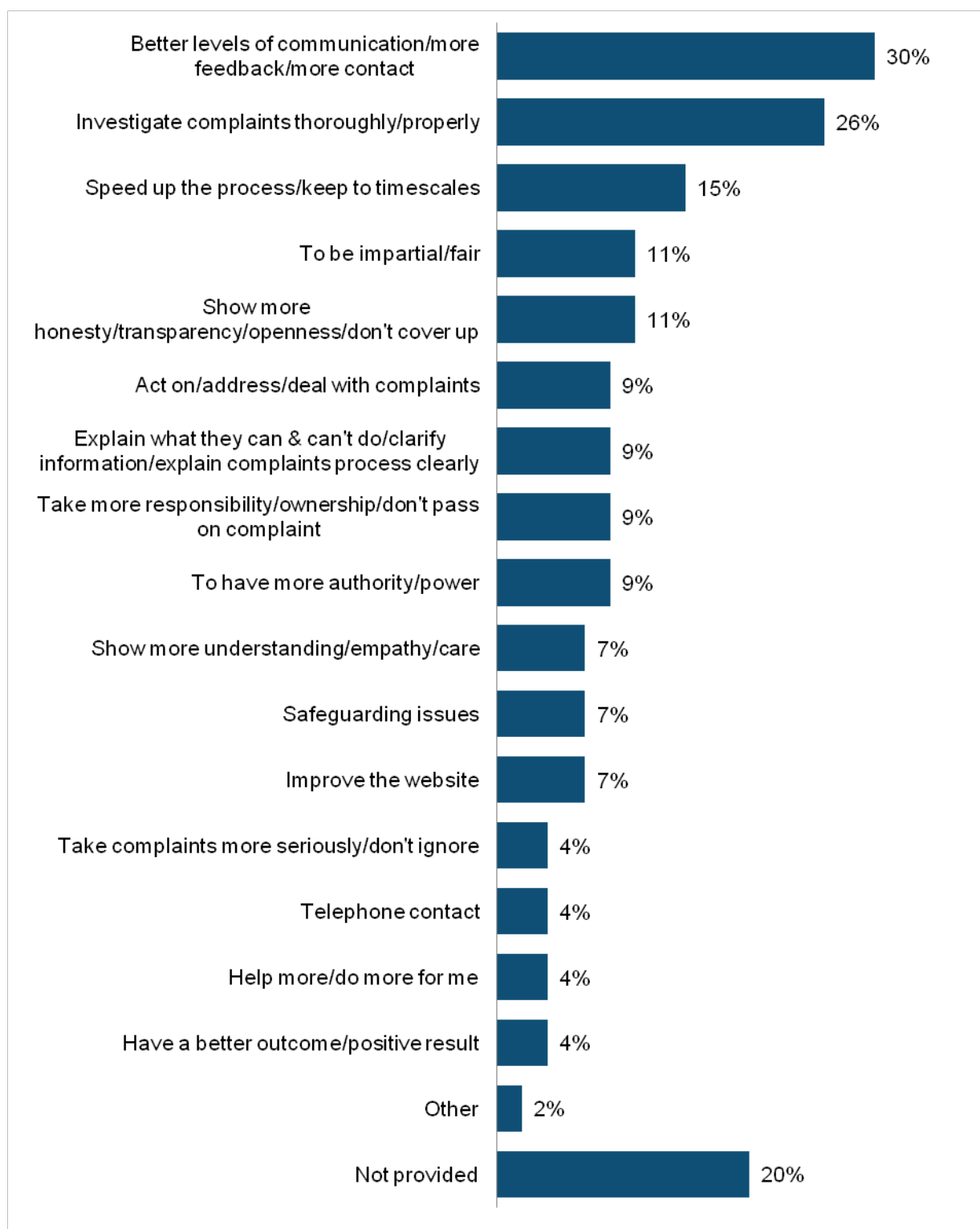


Just under two thirds (63%) of full complaint respondents claim they would be critical of the department and how it handles school complaints when speaking to other people. Specifically, 39% respond they would be critical without being asked, while a further 24% claim they would be critical if they were asked. Only 15% would speak highly of the department (if asked), while 13% would be neutral.

Respondents were asked how the department could make them more satisfied with the service. As shown in Figure 24, the main areas for improvement according to full complaint respondents were better levels of communication/more feedback (30%) and investigating complaints thoroughly (26%). Other popular suggestions included speeding up the process (15%), being impartial (11%) and showing more honesty/transparency (11%).

There are some differences in suggestions from the first stage respondents, as shown in Figure 11, although due to small sample bases they are not significant differences. First stage respondents seemed to be more concerned with the department taking their complaints more seriously (35%), helping them more (18%) and acting on/addressing complaints (18%).

**Figure 24: Ways the department could improve satisfaction with their service – unprompted responses (full complaint respondents)**



Sample base: All full complaint respondents (46). The chart includes responses mentioned by 4% or more respondents.



# Conclusions and Recommendations

## Driving Service Improvements

Generally there have been some improvements in Year 3 compared to earlier years, although due to the small sample base, many of these are not statistically significantly different. For example, 67% were critical of the department and how it handles school complaints, 14% neutral and 11% would speak highly. This compares to 70%, 18% and 7% in Year 2 and 72%, 16% and 8% in Year 1<sup>6</sup>.

The following statistically significant differences are apparent:

- More complainants used the Schools Complaints Form (41% in Year 3 compared to 27% in Year 2 and 28% in Year 1) to make their complaint to the department. This is also true of using the DfE National Helpline (17% compared to 8% and 10% respectively).
- A higher proportion had made one previous complaint (13% compared to 7% and 5% respectively).
- There was an increase in complainants giving reasons of generic communication (16% compared to 2% and 0%) and awkward procedures (8% compared to 3% and 0%) as reasons for finding contact with the department difficult.
- More full complaint respondents were satisfied with the outcome of their complaint (20% compared to 6% and 6%).
- For the first time, full complaint respondents mentioned the Private Office/Ministerial involvement as the team dealing with their complaint (15% compared to 0% and 0%).
- Whilst not significant, the data suggests that full complainants are more satisfied in Year 3 than in earlier years (17% compared to 6% in Year 2 and 9% in Year 1).
- More complainants suggested improvements to the service which centred on better levels of communication (25% compared to 14% and 17%) and speeding up the process (13% compared to 4% and 7%).
- Whilst there were no significant differences in overall advocacy, more complainants specifically said they would speak highly of the department if asked (11% compared to 5% and 6%).

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<sup>6</sup> The remaining 4% and 5% respectively responded 'Don't know' to the question on advocacy.

## 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 customer may see as a *resolution* due to the scope of the department's powers: Among those known to have received an outcome from the department and who gave a response indicating how they see their complaint at present, 16% described their complaint as resolved and 35% as 'no longer pursuing' but half (49%) still considered it ongoing. Feedback received from respondents to the survey also suggests that there is a perception among those 'passed back' to go through the local school complaints process (i.e. first stage respondents), that this does not equate to receiving a service, irrespective of any interactions with the service that have taken place<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

# Technical Appendix

## Target Audience and Method

The target audience for the research was those who contacted the department between August 2014 and July 2015, the third year in which the new School Complaint unit was operational.

Service users were informed about the research through the following strapline. This was used on the bottom of the correspondence, and on the decisions cover letter, giving customers the provision to opt-out if they wished to do so.

*In the interest of continuous improvement, the Department for Education employs an external agency to monitor customer satisfaction. You may be contacted by the agency to ask your views about how the department has performed while handling the complaint. If you would prefer not to be contacted, please [either write to the address above or] email: [satisfactionsurvey.complaints@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:satisfactionsurvey.complaints@education.gsi.gov.uk)*

The contacts were extracted from the department's systems at the half-yearly point, and transferred securely to BMG Research, who undertook counts by key variables and removed 53 contacts provided on the basis of duplicate contacts, or insufficient contact information.

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.

Full stage respondents (i.e. those completing the full SCU process) made up a larger proportion of complainants to the department in Year 3 (69%) compared to Year 2 (10%) and Year 1 (14%), and this is reflected in the sample achieved through the survey: 73% of Year 3 respondents are full stage, compared to 11% in Year 2 and 17% in Year 1.

Table 2 shows the numbers mailed and returned of each respondent type (full complaint and first stage complaint) for each of the three survey years.

**Table 2: Respondent Profile and Response Rates by Survey Phase and Year**

	Year 3		Year 2		Year 1(indicative)	
Sent out	<b>190</b>		<b>1,954</b>		<b>1,485</b>	
	58 short	132 long	1,766 short	188 long	1,172 short	215 long
Received	<b>63</b>		<b>449</b>		<b>429</b>	
	17 short	46 long	398 short	51 long	340 short	71 long (18 N/A)
% response rate	<b>33%</b>		<b>23%</b>		<b>29%</b>	
	29% first stage	35% full complaint	23% first stage	27% full complaint	29% first stage	33% full complaint

## Sample Size and Robustness

The final sample invited to take part in the survey comprised 190 contacts, of whom 63 completed a survey. This equates to a response rate of 33% overall.

This sample size offers a maximum confidence level (margin of error) on a full base of +/- 12.3%. This indicates that a response of 50% in the survey would be between 37.7% and 62.3% if it were asked of the full 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 190, which increases the margin of error. However where questions are reported at the upper or lower end of response scales (e.g. 90% as opposed to 50%), this reduces the margin of error.

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.

## Data Outputs

Six sets of data tabulations were produced based on the results of the survey. These were:

Year 3 only:

- A combined data set for questions common to the long and short questionnaires, including both full complaint and first stage respondents.
- A filtered report based on full complaint respondents.
- A filtered report based on first stage respondents.
- Years 1, 2 and 3 combined:
- A combined data set for questions common to the long and short questionnaires, including both full complaint and first stage respondents.
- A filtered report based on full complaint respondents.
- A filtered report based on first stage respondents.
- 

Data were tabulated by variables including:

- Complaint type (First stage or Full complainant)
- Year of survey (Year 1, 2 and 3)
- Complaint Outcome (Not upheld/Partially/Upheld, from DfE records)
- Considers Complaint (Ongoing/ Resolved/ Not Pursuing)
- Complaint Completing Group (SCU/Other)
- Respondent type (Parent/Other incl. General public/not known)
- Satisfaction/Advocacy of the department
- Gender
- Age
- Impairment
- Ethnicity

Where the subgroup base is too low, or the data 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 between subgroups have not been drawn out in this written report, or they have been drawn out with a note underlining that they are to be treated as indicative.

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.



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