



NHS Highland Complaints Annual Report 2024/2025

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Introduction

The NHS Highland Feedback and Complaints Annual Report 2024–2025 provides a consolidated review of all feedback received between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025. It outlines the lessons learned and details the improvements implemented as a result. The report also summarises the proactive methods used to gather input, ensuring ongoing refinement and development of local services.

Encouraging and Gathering Feedback and Complaints

NHS Highland welcomes and encourages feedback from patients, carers and family members about the services we provide. Information about how to provide feedback is made available to patients, carers and family members via the NHS Highland website [Contact the Feedback team | NHS Highland](#).

Feedback information leaflets are provided to patients, relatives and carers which encourage individuals to provide feedback and make a complaint. Sign posting to the Care Opinion website and complaints leaflets are advertised throughout all of NHS Highland patient areas.

NHS Highland gathers patient feedback in a number of different ways; this includes but is not limited to:

- Patients, carers and family members can provide feedback to any NHS Highland member of staff who will be happy to help them. Correspondence can be received via letter, email, telephone and in person. Alternatively, they can contact the Feedback Team as follows:
 - NHS Highland Feedback Team
PO Box 5713
Inverness
IV1 9AQ
01463 705997
Nhshighland.feedback@nhs.scot
- Online feedback through Care Opinion www.careopinion.org.uk
- NHS Highland website [Contact the Feedback team | NHS Highland](#)
- Patient feedback provided by other organisations.
- Service, Department and Team surveys.
- National patient experience surveys.
- Letters and information from elected members of Parliament on behalf of patients and families.
- Local feedback processes by individual Services.

In 2024/25, feedback shows that the vast majority of patients are satisfied with the care and treatment provided by NHS Highland. However, we recognise that, on rare occasions, our services may not meet the high standards and expectations we set for ourselves. Feedback is essential in these instances—it helps us address any shortfalls, learn from our mistakes, and continuously improve our care.

To make sharing experiences as straightforward as possible, NHS Highland has an established centrally based Feedback Team. Acting as a single point of contact, the team provides easy access and consistent support for patients and members of the public. In addition, every NHS Highland staff member is empowered to resolve concerns directly at the front line whenever possible.

To support patients to provide feedback the Patient Advice and Support Service (PASS) is delivered by the Citizens Advice Bureaus in:

- Argyll and Bute
18 Argyll Street
Lochgilphead, Argyll
PA31 8NE
Tel: 01546 605 550
Email: <https://www.abcab.org.uk/contact-us>

- Inverness, Badenoch & Strathspey
29-31 Union Street
Inverness
IV11QA
Tel: 01463 237 664
Email: <https://www.invernesscab.org/contact-us>

- Ross & Cromarty
Suie House
Market Square
Alness
IV17 0UD
Tel: 01349 883 333
Email: adviser@alnesscab.casonline.org.uk

- Skye and Lochalsh Citizens Advice Bureau
The Green
Portree
IV51 9BT
Tel: 01478 612 032
Email: <https://www.slcab.org.uk/contact-us>

- Lochaber Citizens Advice Bureau
Dudley Road
Fort William
PH33 6JB
Tel: 01397 705 311
Email: <https://www.lochabercab.org.uk/contact-us>

At the Clinical Governance Committee, negative and positive patient stories are presented, complaint reports and SPSO reports are tabled on a quarterly basis. The SPSO report details the outcome of the SPSO investigation and what action the Board has taken.

Care Opinion Report 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

NHS Highland received 255 stories within this timeframe with over 28,909 stories read. Not all the stories were about NHS Highland but were made by either NHS Highland residents attending NHS Highland or other Boards as well as visitors utilising NHS Highland's services. NHS Highland now has 94 subscription members signed up to use Care Opinion. A focus for 2025/2026 is to increase members and increase the use of Care Opinion.

Care Opinion continues to provide a useful tool for learning and improving our services. In 2024/2025 Care Opinion was aligned to the Feedback Team to be managed. During this period, the Care Opinion responsiveness rate has increased from 50% to 93%. The Feedback Team now facilitate the responses within Care Opinion sending reminders to the various service handlers to prompt them when there is a story showing for response.

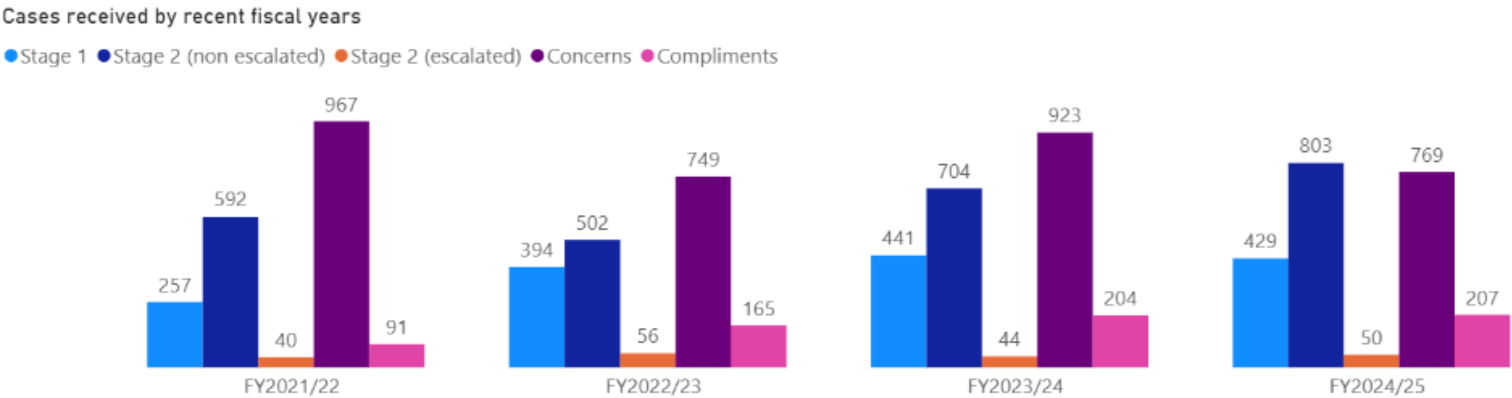
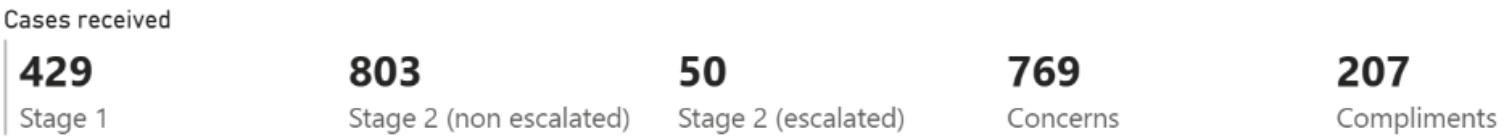
We saw a consistent position regarding our positive stories with a score of 67% in 2024/2025. These stories are considered positive or minimally critical.

The report tells us that NHS Highland's staff and care provision are good but that there is room for improvement with regards communication, staff attitude and treatment.



Learning from complaints, concerns and compliments

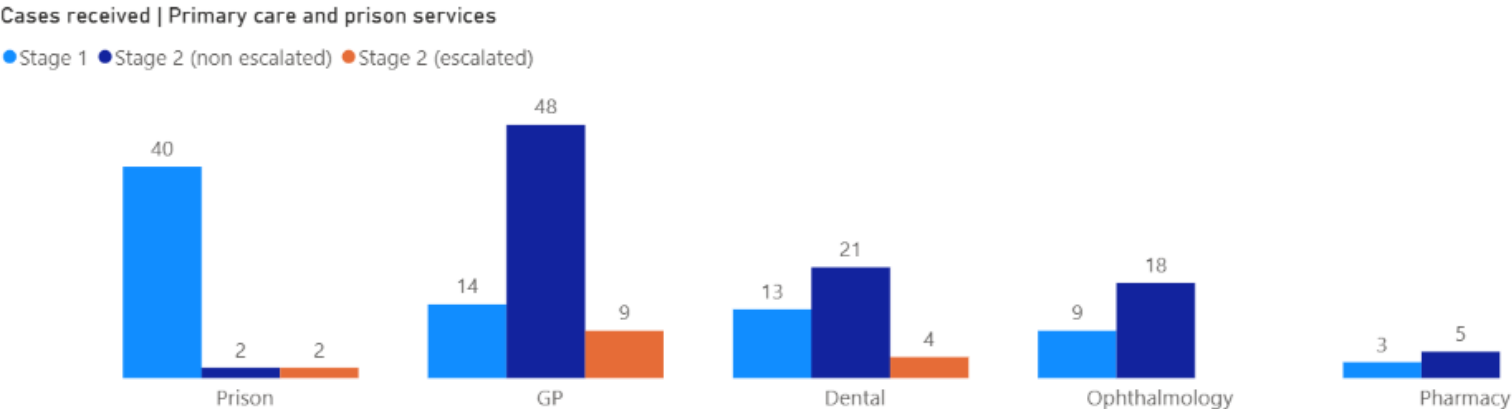
Number of cases received



There has been a significant increase in Stage 2 complaints receive in 2024/25 with an increase of 14% from 2023/24.

There are various reasons to explain the increase in complaints received including staffing pressures and increase in waiting times, a higher awareness of rights and routes to raising complaints, post-pandemic strain and complexity of care needs.

Other complaint types remain in line with previous year with the exception of Concerns.



NHS Highland logs health complaints from residents of HMP Inverness. The majority of these complaints are received and closed at Stage 1.

Compliments

During the 2024/25 period, 207 compliments were recorded in Datix, consistent with 2023/24. Each compliment is formally acknowledged by the Feedback Team and forwarded to the relevant Operational Unit for distribution among colleagues.

We value the time and effort patients and their families invest in sharing their experiences with NHS Highland and are committed to issuing a personalised response to every compliment received.

Compliment Examples:

- “From my first contact prior to admission and all the way through to post-op discharge, I can only say that I cannot fault any element of my experience with you. In particular, I just wanted to say how impressed I was with all the members of staff I had contact with and to wholeheartedly thank you for making, what can be a stressful and concerning time for a patient, a pleasant and reassuring process. Without exception you were professional, competent, friendly, caring and efficient.”
- “I just wanted to drop a quick email of thanks and appreciation for the care and support I have received as a patient at Raigmore Hospital. I was diagnosed with bowel cancer in August of this year, having been for two scopes, scans etc and then final surgery carried out by the amazing [Consultant name removed]. The speed at which I was seen was remarkable and the consistency of care across the service was extremely reassuring at an extremely stressful time for myself and my family. I have worked for the NHS across various roles for 20+ years, however it's not until you are a patient that you really value and appreciate the patient journey and get the experience of the core of our NHS.”
- “I'm writing to say a huge thank you for my excellent care and treatment over the last many months. I was diagnosed with EUPD in February 2023 and felt shocked and relieved. People with personality disorders still face stigmatising attitudes and discrimination so I wondered what was ahead as I tried to navigate healthcare. I can't speak highly enough of each professional I encountered in treatment. Thanks too to whoever made the decision to train more staff in order to deliver more courses, as this meant getting the right treatment in a timely manner and that was very much appreciated. Despite not wanting a diagnosis of a personality disorder, I do feel lucky that I received it in Highland where the treatment pathway is exemplary, and the individuals in the PD team are skilled and caring practitioners. Thank you all, and I hope to never need you again!”
- “Last weekend my husband was airlifted from Skye to Raigmore HDU. I want to thank and commend every single nurse and nursing assistant for the loving care they provided. Apart from being very clinically skilled they were all without exception kind, empathic and understanding. A special thankyou to the wonderful nursing assistant on the ward. The staff made a very scary experience for our family so much better.”

Concerns

The number of concerns logged during 2024/25 reduced from the previous year. On average there were over 60 concerns raised per month.

Concerns are recorded on Datix and forwarded to the Operational Units to respond directly to the patient/patient representative.

There are no SPSO mandated deadlines for concerns, but we have an expectation that the Operational Unit will respond within 5 working days to concerns. If not resolved informally, then we may escalate and take the concern through the complaints process.

Concerns received cover a wide range of issues from position on waiting lists to Estates issues.

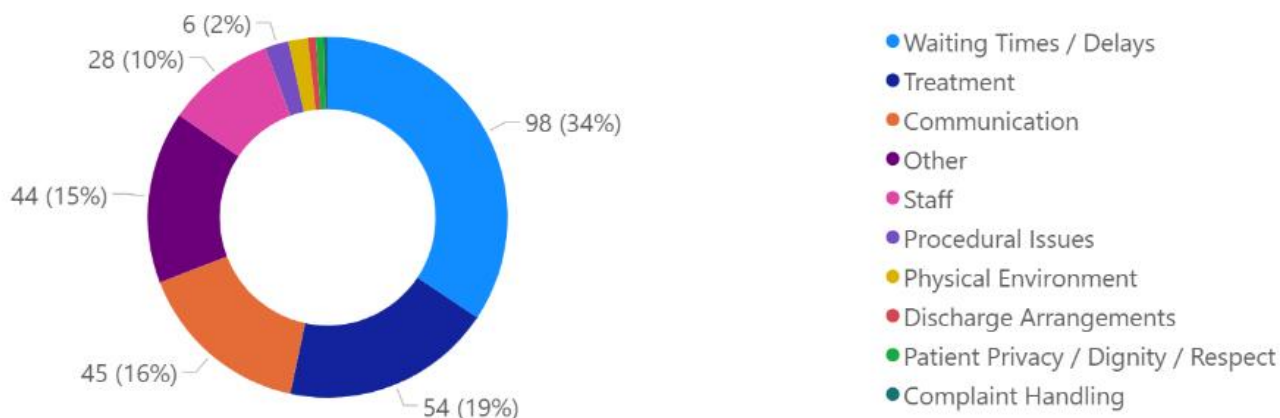
All concerns are acknowledged and signposting is provided where a concern is raised which cannot be progressed through NHS Highland's complaints process.

Complaint issues for stage 1 and stage 2 closed cases

NOTE: Closed cases include an outcome of fully upheld, partially upheld and not upheld only

Stage 1

Issues | Closed stage 1 Cases



Where possible, straightforward complaints that require little or no investigation are resolved at the earliest opportunity by logging as a Stage 1 complaint and ensuring the response is provided by as close to the point of service delivery as possible.

A total of 429 Stage 1 complaints were logged during 2024/25 with more than half being about waiting times/delays and low level concerns about treatment.

Approximately 50% of our Stage 1 complaints are responded to within 5 working days.

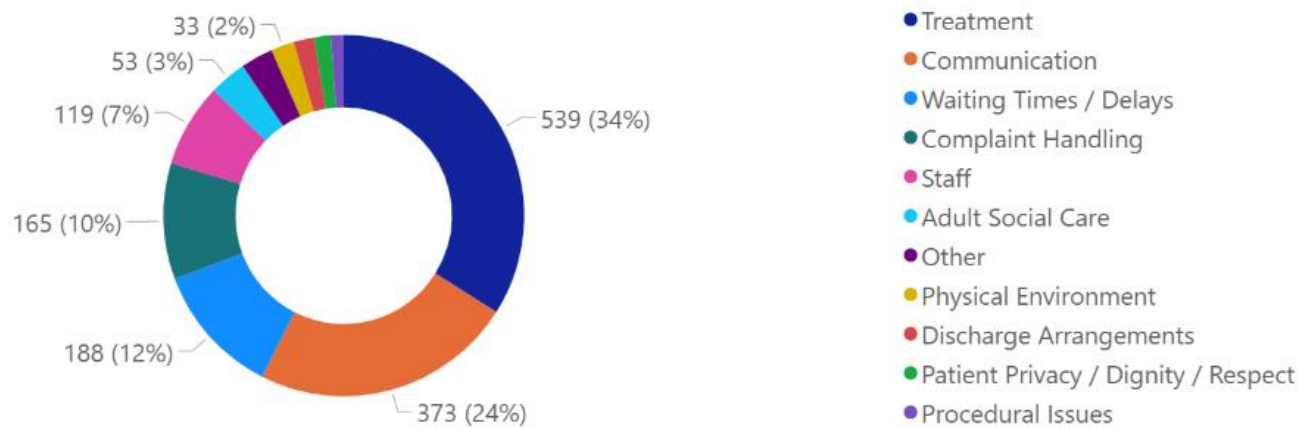
45% of Stage 1 complaints are closed and considered to be fully upheld. The remainder are equally considered to be not upheld or partially upheld.

Examples of Stage 1 complaints logged in year include:

- Removal from waiting list.
- Attitude and behaviour of staff
- Medication concerns.
- Clarification regarding vaccination eligibility.
- Discharge arrangements.

Stage 2

Issues | Closed stage 2 Cases



Not all complaints are suitable for early resolution and not all complaints will be satisfactorily resolved at that stage. Complaints handled at the investigation stage (Stage 2) of the complaints handling procedure are typically serious or complex, and require a detailed examination before we can respond to a complainant.

A total of 853 Stage 2 complaints were logged during 2024/25. Over 1/3 of those complaints related to concerns regarding treatment, whilst a further 1/4 were raising concerns about communication from the organisation.

Approximately 48% of our Stage 2 complaints are considered to be at least partially upheld, with a further 27% considered to be fully upheld.

Our performance with regards to responding with the target 20 working days has reduced throughout the year – reporting only 25% of Stage 2 complaints being responded to within 20 working days in the final quarter of the year.

The Top 5 areas for whom Stage 2 complaints were logged were General Medical, Emergency Care, Orthopaedics, General Surgery and Salaried GP Services.

Actions and improvements from highlighted cases

- Where waiting times have been the issue raised – we have been able to identify where Scottish Government or local Board funding has been made to available to increase, for example, access to additional waiting list initiatives for both inpatient and outpatient lists.
- Where attitude and behaviour issues have been raised, Services have reported that these issues have been discussed at team meetings with real-life examples provided and reflected on to improve future communication with patients, including timely responses to queries raised at an operational level.
- Where access to treatment is affected by current resource available within the Board, discussion has taken place with colleagues in other Board areas to source capacity in other areas or to arrange a visiting service via other Health Boards.
- Where discharge arrangements have been less than adequate, debriefs have taken place with the individual(s) or team(s) involved in that patient's discharge and discharge documentation has now been incorporated into the induction documentation provided to Resident Doctors.
- Teaching on end of life care and death certification for all grades of doctors increased this year, particularly for Resident Doctors.
- Care at Home have reviewed and strengthened their emergency staffing plans to minimise last minute cancellations.

Complaint Process Experience

The complaint handling experience survey was put on hold in 2024/25 due to operational pressures and a reflection that the existing system was not adding value.

We aim to re-establish this in 2025/26 as we understand the importance of reflecting on NHS Highland's complaints process.

The re-established process will ensure that our processes remain effective, and we hope that the feedback will enhance the complainant experience by pinpointing bottlenecks within the process and allow us to reallocate effort and resources where it matters most to complainants.

We also hope that such Feedback will allow further staff development where we can use real feedback scenarios to improve our communication with patients and their representatives.

Reflection on the process experience will also allow us to audit regulatory alignment.

Child Friendly Complaints Process

In 2023, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman published draft Child-Friendly Complaints Principles aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

To strengthen compliance, we have launched a streamlined Child-Friendly Complaints Process that includes:

- Integration of a Child-Friendly Facilitator role within the Feedback Team.
- Procedures to secure informed consent from children when complaints are raised on their behalf
- A child-centred investigation approach:
 - Explaining the complaints process directly to the child.
 - Collaborating with the child on complaint ownership.
 - Tailoring communication methods throughout the investigation and at closure.

We are continuously refining this process in partnership with NHS Highland's Child Health Commissioner and a multidisciplinary group that includes colleagues from Highland Council.

It is of note that from March 2027, we will report on our compliance with UNCRC requirements every three years.

Staff Awareness and Training

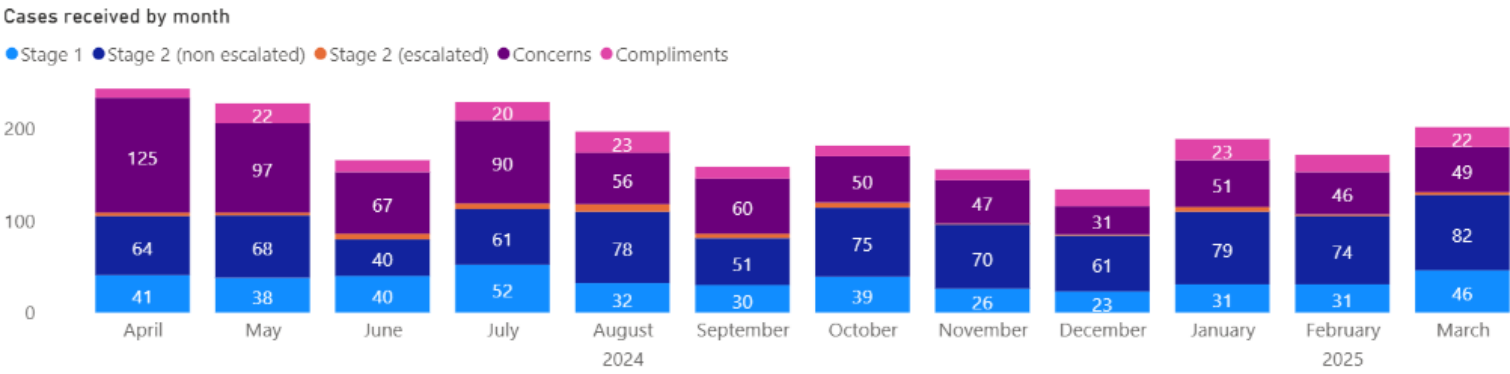
Complaints training has been organised regularly throughout 2024-2025 with focus on Complaint Handling Procedure and the role and responsibilities of the Feedback Team and Operational Units. Approaching 100 Investigating Officers have attended the training sessions. An Investigation Officer Resource pack has been developed and is available to staff undertaking complaints investigations.

In addition, specific training sessions have been given to Senior Charge nurses, FY1 and FY2 staff, along with a bespoke session for Mental Health Services on how to draft a quality response, and this continues into the latter part of 2024.

Future training sessions are planned for Acute Medical, focusing on quality of investigations and responses.

Performance Indicator – Cases received

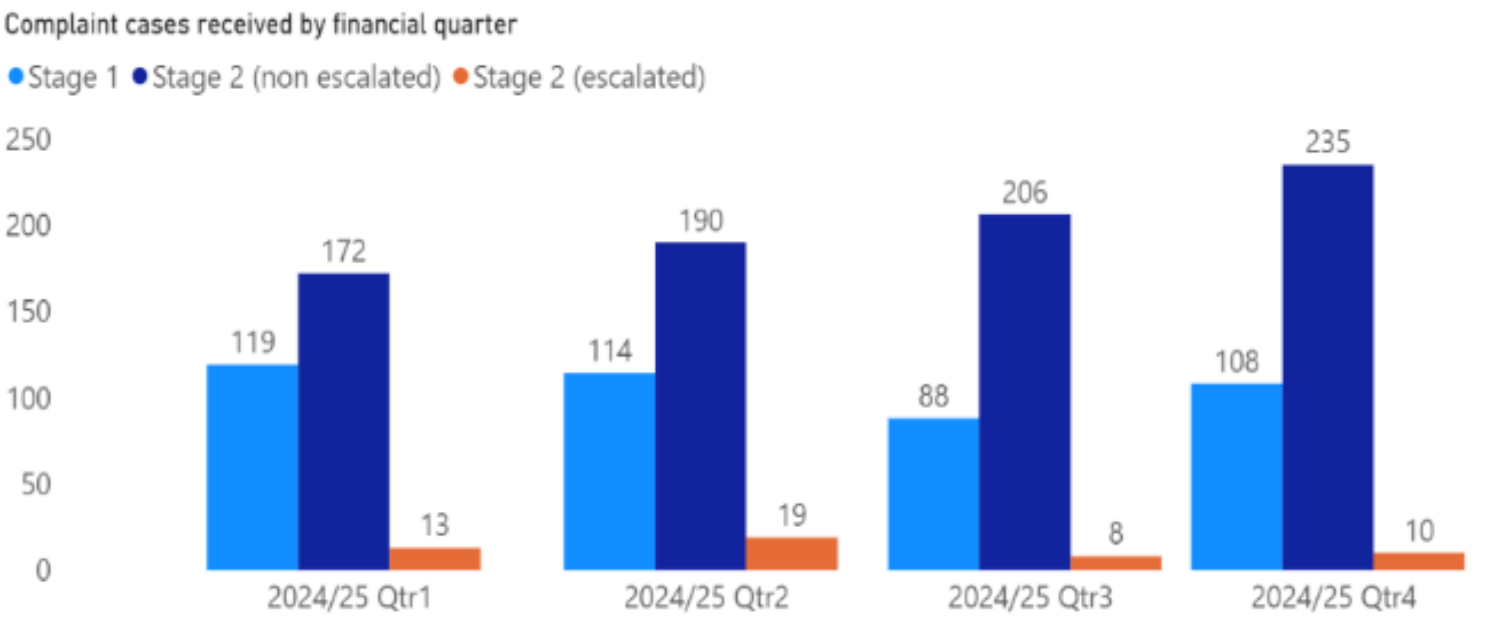
Breakdown of cases received



Stage 1 complaints remained fairly static throughout the year with a peak of 52 received in July and an expected drop-off in December.

Stage 2 complaints increased throughout the year with the average each Quarter increasing by 10.5%, 8.4% and 14% respectively and by 36.6% from Q1-Q4.

Breakdown of complaint cases received

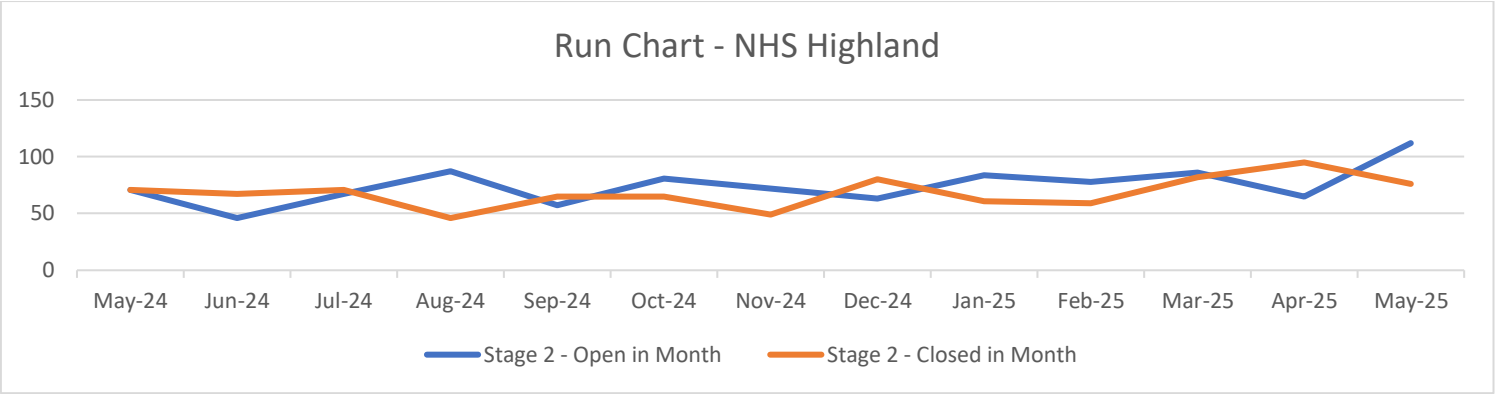
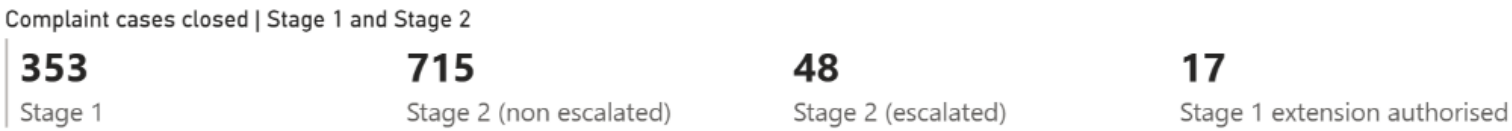


As previously noted, complaints received (Stage 2) has increased over each Quarter of 2024/25. It is expected that this increase will continue into 2025/26.

Performance Indicator – Complaint Cases Closed

NOTE: Closed cases include an outcome of fully upheld, partially upheld and not upheld only

Number of cases closed



We are consistently opening more complaints each month than are being closed. We recognise that the current approach is unsustainable, as it drives higher volumes of correspondence through the feedback process and places additional demand on both the Clinical Governance team and Operational Units.

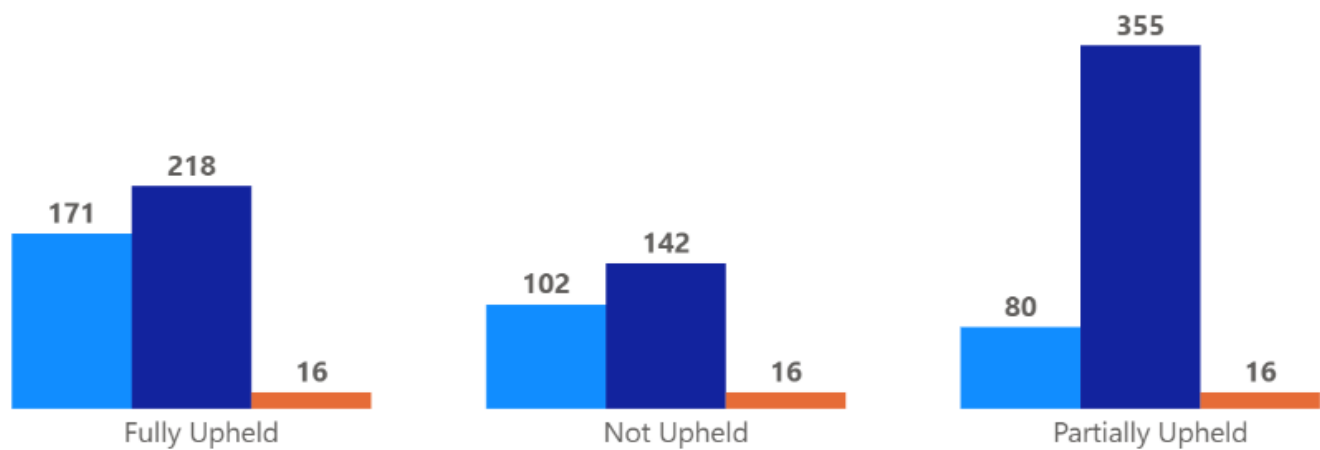
Performance Indicator – Complaint cases outcomes

NOTE: Closed cases include an outcome of fully upheld, partially upheld and not upheld only

Number of complaint cases closed by outcome

Complaint cases closed | Outcome

● Stage 1 ● Stage 2 (non escalated) ● Stage 2 (escalated)



Complaint cases closed | Outcomes (%)

Outcome	Stage 1	Stage 2 (non escalated)	Stage 2 (escalated)
Fully Upheld	48%	30%	33%
Not Upheld	29%	20%	33%
Partially Upheld	23%	50%	33%

The Stage 2 reported outcomes suggest that the Feedback Team are applying consistent standards when assessing complaints although it is recognised that these outcome categorisations are crude and their value can be questioned.

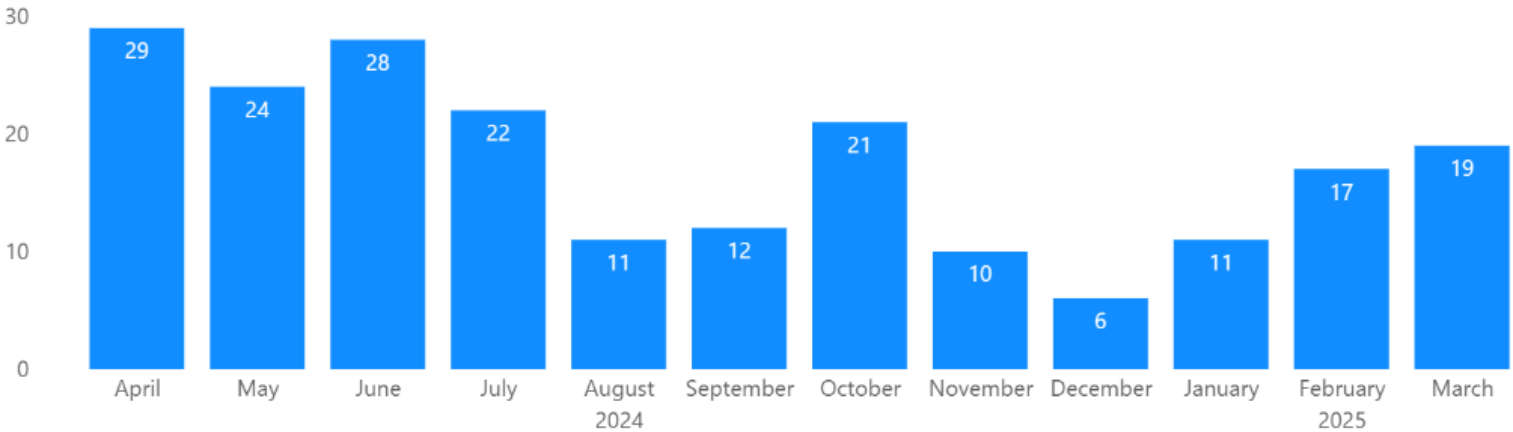
It is of note that nearly 50% of Stage 1 complaints are upheld fully reflecting the types of complaints which are categorised at this level. They will often be low level complaints about waiting times or objection to staff attitude and behaviour which can often be resolved with an explanation, apology and reflection.

Performance Indicator – Complaint cases working day performance
NOTE: Closed cases include an outcome of fully upheld, partially upheld and not upheld only

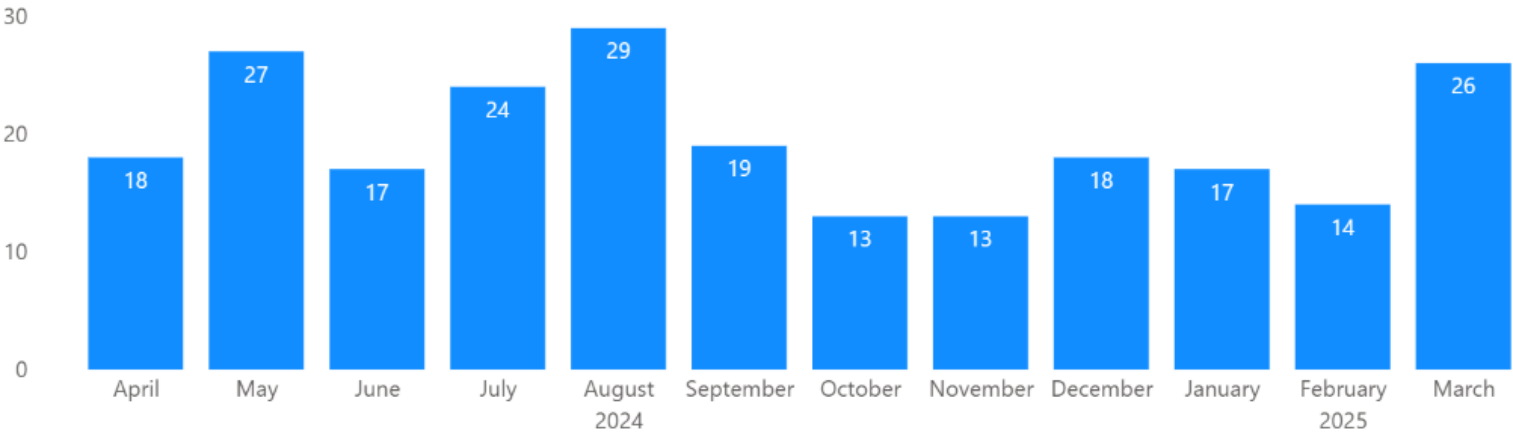
Number of complaint cases closed within the identified timescale



Stage 1 cases closed within 5 working days

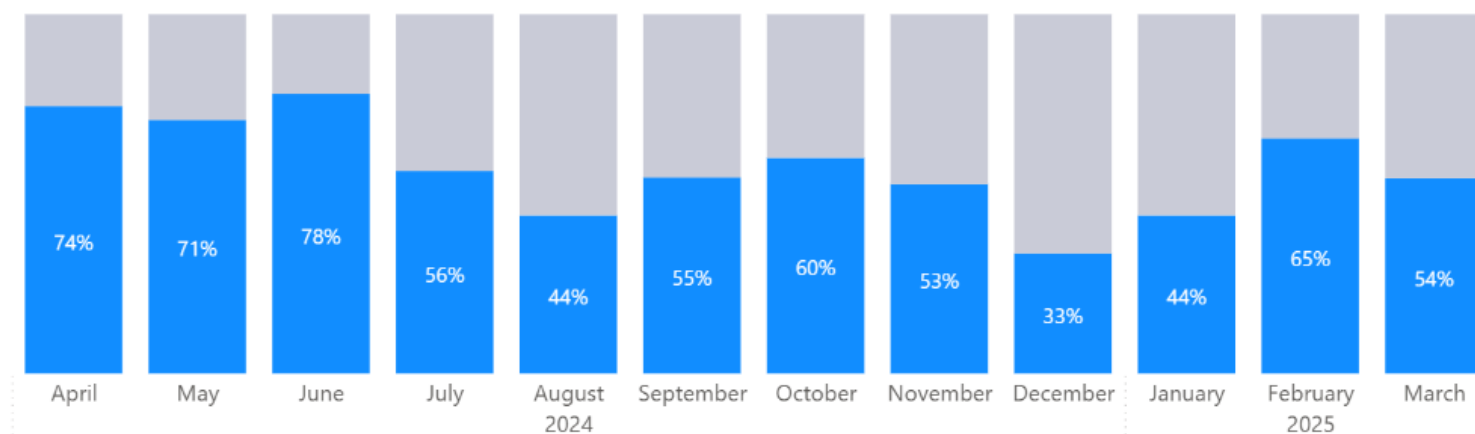


Stage 2 cases (non escalated and escalated) closed within 20 working days

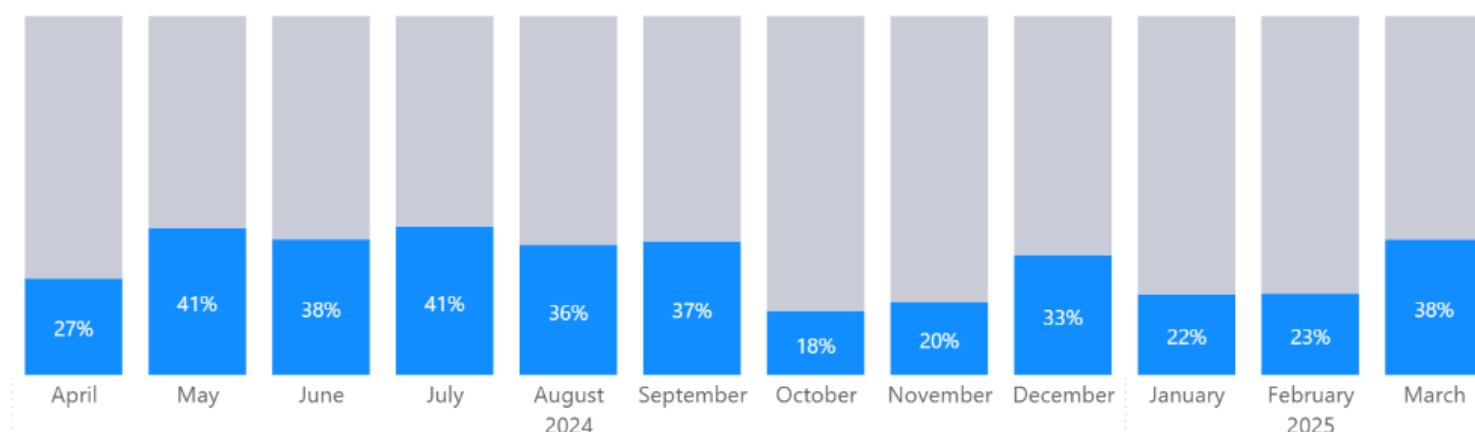


Working day performance of complaint cases

Stage 1 cases | Working day performance (%)



Stage 2 cases (non escalated and escalated) | working day performance (%)



Performance against the prescribed targets for both Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints is of concern.

Stage 1 responses were regularly above 70% at the start of the year but have dropped significantly to an average of 54% in the final Quarter of the year.

Stage 2 responses, whilst not dropping quite as significantly, have fallen from an average of 35% at the start of the year to a concerning 28% in the final Quarter of the year.

The reasons behind this are multi-factorial and have been discussed at all levels of the organisation. The main reasons attributed to the poor reported performance are:

- Increasing number of complaints.
- Complexity of cases – especially when involving visiting clinical staff our outsourced services.
- Competing demands on Investigating Officers and Operational Units.
- Additional ‘churn’ and disruption in the system, and associated processes, from an inability to close down complaints within the target time.
- Revision of draft responses at approval stage.

NHS Highland

Annual Report on Feedback and Complaints Performance Indicator Data collection 2024/25

Performance Indicator Four:

*Stage 1 and Stage 2 only

*Does not include complaints with a withdrawn, SPSO or further correspondence status/stage

4. Summary of total number of complaints received in the reporting year

4a. Number of complaints received by the NHS Territorial Board or NHS Special Board Complaints and Feedback Team	1282
4b. Number of complaints received by NHS Primary Care Service Contractors (<i>Territorial Boards only</i>)	n/a
4c. Total number of complaints received in the NHS Board area	1282

NHS Board - sub-groups of complaints received

NHS Board managed Primary Care services;	
4d. General Practitioner	70
4e. Dental	38
4f. Ophthalmic	27
4g. Pharmacy	8
Total - Board managed Primary Care services (this total should be included in 4a)	143
Independent Contractors - Primary Care services;	
4h. General Practitioner	n/a
4i. Dental	n/a
4j. Ophthalmic	n/a
4k. Pharmacy	n/a
Total – Independent Contractors (this total should be entered at 4b)	n/a
4l. Combined total of Primary Care Service complaints	143
4m. Total of prisoner complaints received (<i>Boards with prisons in their area only</i>) Note: Do not count complaints which are unable to be concluded due to liberation of prisoner / loss of contact.	44

Performance Indicator Five

*Does not include complaints with a withdrawn, SPSO or further correspondence status/stage

*Complaints with an outcome of Fully Upheld, Partially Upheld and Not Upheld only

5. The total number of complaints closed by NHS Boards in the reporting year (do not include contractor data, withdrawn cases or cases where consent not received).

Number of complaints closed by the NHS Board	Number	As a % of all NHS Board complaints closed (not contractors)
5a. Stage One	353	32%
5b. Stage two – non escalated	715	64%
5c. Stage two - escalated	48	4%
5d. Total complaints closed by NHS Board (NOTE – outcomes must equal cases closed)	1116	

Performance Indicator Six

6. Complaints upheld, partially upheld and not upheld

Stage one complaints

	Number	As a % of all complaints closed by NHS Board at stage one
6a. Number of complaints upheld at stage one	171	48%
6b. Number of complaints not upheld at stage one	102	29%
6c. Number of complaints partially upheld at stage one	80	23%
6d. Total stage one complaints outcomes (total must equal stage one complaints closed)	353	

Stage two complaints

	Number	As a % of all complaints closed by
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Non-escalated complaints		NHS Boards at stage two (non-escalated)
6e. Number of non-escalated complaints upheld at stage two	218	30%
6f. Number of non-escalated complaints not upheld at stage two	142	20%
6g. Number of non-escalated complaints partially upheld at stage two	355	50%
6h. Total stage two, non-escalated complaints outcomes (total must equal stage two non-escalated complaints closed)	715	

Stage two escalated complaints

Escalated complaints	Number	As a % of all escalated complaints closed by NHS Boards at stage two
6i. Number of escalated complaints upheld at stage two	16	33%
6j. Number of escalated complaints not upheld at stage two	16	33%
6k. Number of escalated complaints partially upheld at stage two	16	33%
6l. Total stage two escalated complaints outcomes (total must equal stage two escalated complaints closed)	48	

Performance Indicator Eight

8. Complaints closed in full within the timescales

*Complaints with an outcome of Fully Upheld, Partially Upheld and Not Upheld only

This indicator measures complaints closed within 5 working days at stage one and 20 working days at stage two.

	Number	As a % of complaints closed by NHS Boards at each stage
8a. Number of complaints closed at stage one within 5 working days.	210	47%
8b. Number of non-escalated complaints closed at stage two within 20 working days	215	48%
8c. Number of escalated complaints closed at stage two within 20 working days	20	5%
8d. Total number of complaints closed within timescales (please check figures do not exceed numbers of cases closed at each stage)	445	

Performance Indicator Nine

9. Number of cases where an extension is authorised

This indicator measures the number of complaints not closed within the CHP timescale, where an extension was authorised*.

	Number	As a % of complaints closed by NHS Boards at each stage
9a. Number of complaints closed at stage one where extension was authorised	17	100%
9b. Number of complaints closed at stage two where extension was authorised (this includes both escalated and non-escalated complaints)	n/a	n/a
9c. Total number of extensions authorised	17	

***Note:** The SPSO confirm that there is no prescriptive approach about who exactly should authorise an extension – only that the organisation takes a proportionate approach to determining an appropriate senior person – and this is something that NHS Boards should develop a process for internally. This indicator aims to manage the risk of cases being extended beyond the CHP timescale without any senior officer approval.