

Learning from mistakes

How complaints can drive improvements to public services



**citizens
advice**

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Citizens Advice has seen a 63 per cent increase in requests for help to complain about public services over the last four years. We decided to explore why people are struggling to complain, or deterred from complaining, and how reversing these trends and making better use of complaints data could drive service improvements. We found that:

People don't make formal complaints after poor public service. 45 per cent of people have experienced poor public service recently, but only 22 per cent of them went on to make a formal complaint. However, 73 per cent used informal channels to share their frustrations, with one in five younger people turning to social media, for instance.

The feedback and insight of specific groups is being missed. 52 per cent of people said they didn't complain about a poor experience with a public service because they felt 'it wouldn't change anything'. Younger and older people, and those on lower incomes, tend to find it hardest to make formal complaints.

Aggregating complaints data, including from informal channels such as social media, can provide important insight into potential service improvements. These insights - for example on call waiting times to HMRC - can be gained and acted on in real time.

Mistakes happen, but we are wasting opportunities to improve public services if people are put off complaining and if the value of complaints data is not realised. Through our research, we identify six key opportunities:

- There should be no 'wrong door' when people want to make a complaint.
- Public bodies should develop better insight and intelligence capabilities on emerging service issues through big data aggregation and other means, to make services more effective and responsive to public needs.
- Public service providers need to modernise their complaints culture and empower frontline staff.
- People should have access to an independent, impartial organisation for help with their complaint.
- People should be able to complain to a single point of contact.
- The power to raise 'super complaints' on behalf of public service users should be introduced.

Methodology

This report combines insights from several sets of quantitative and qualitative data. We draw upon intelligence from our own network, looking at data recorded about clients of local Citizens Advice across the country, including trends in ‘advice issue codes’ (AICs) for England, which are recorded by our advisers each time they help a client. We also draw upon qualitative data collected in a series of five semi-structured depth interviews and three focus groups with local Citizens Advice clients who have gone through public service complaints processes.¹ We combine this with insights from the Citizens Advice Network Panel. The Network Panel is a monthly survey sent to over 800 staff and volunteers across England and Wales, asking about their experiences of and views on policy issues.²

Apart from Citizens Advice network and client data, we analyse throughout the report the results of two nationally representative social surveys we commissioned. The Complaints Survey³ results are based on a weighted sample of 1,719 adults resident in England, surveyed in December 2015, and the Civic Life Survey⁴ results are based on a sample of 2,025 UK adults, surveyed in December 2014.

Finally, this report analyses publicly available data collected from Twitter. Given the sheer scale of the ‘big data’ on offer from social media sites, systematic analysis is beyond the capacity of individual human researchers. We turned instead to natural language processing (NLP) software, which allows researchers to engage in a form of interactive and iterative ‘machine learning’ so that algorithms can be used to reliably and automatically categorise very large numbers of texts. Working with software developed by the Centre for Analysis of Social Media (CASM) at Demos and the University of Sussex, Citizens Advice researchers were able to analyse the Twitter data for our case study services. We looked at all ‘at mentions’ (where a user tags another user’s handle in a tweet by including, for example, ‘@CitizensAdvice...’) of @HMRCgovuk, @DVLAGovuk and 345 separate English local authority Twitter handles, over the course of one year; a total of 441,172 tweets. Using this methodology, we were able to develop algorithms capable of identifying complaints, as well as types of complaint, from large datasets with a minimum accuracy level of 70 per cent.

¹ We interviewed local Citizens Advice clients about their experiences of making complaints about poor public services over the period November 2015 - January 2016. This included complaints about a hospital, HMRC, a school, the DWP and a social care complaint to a local authority. The focus groups took place on 1, 2 and 14 December 2015.

² 278 staff and volunteers from across the national network responded to this round of the Network Panel survey.

³ The Complaints Survey was carried out by Populus.

⁴ The Civic Life Survey was carried out by Boxclever Consulting.

Chapter 1. Context

Growing recognition of the need for reform

Reforms to the public service complaints landscape are long overdue. Government, key service providers, and the various public service ‘ombudsmen’ charged with handling top level complaints, have all suggested that the existing complaints landscape is in urgent need of an overhaul.

The clinical failings that took place in Stafford Hospital highlighted the vital need to get better at capturing and learning from complaints. The 2013 Francis Inquiry identified as a key driver of those problems the failure of the local NHS Trust to listen to, and act upon, complaints from service users and their families.⁵ This triggered a series of further investigations and reports from public service stakeholders including a government mandated review into NHS complaints handling. In the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) submission to that review, Dame Julie Mellor spoke of a “toxic cocktail” of reluctance to complain on the part of service users and unwillingness to listen to complaints on the part of NHS services.⁶

While it was an NHS service that first drew serious attention to the question of public service complaints handling, the debate has quickly expanded to encompass public services more broadly. The House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) report *More complaints please!* was also prompted by the Stafford Hospital case, but MPs used the report to set out a rights-based approach to public service complaints, wherein people have the “right to have their complaint respected, for their concerns to be addressed, and for any wrongdoing to be put right with fair redress and without undue delay”.⁷

But despite growing levels of scrutiny of current public service complaints systems, reforms have been limited. As a report by Healthwatch England explained, “change so far has only tinkered with the existing bureaucratic arrangements for complaints handling, and looked largely at things from the system’s perspective”.⁸ Frustrations with the system, however, are gaining momentum. Following the Gordon Review, the Government has committed to publishing a Draft Bill which will bring together the public service ombudsmen. Whilst the content of the Draft Bill is not yet confirmed, its aim will be to simplify and improve the current complaints process.⁹

⁵ Thomas Powell (2013), [The Francis Report \(Report of the Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust public inquiry\) and the Government’s response](#).

⁶ PHSO (2013), [Submission by the Health Service Ombudsman for England to the Review of the NHS Complaints System](#).

⁷ PASC (2014), [More complaints please! Twelfth Report of Session 2013–14](#).

⁸ Healthwatch England (2014), [Suffering in Silence](#).

⁹ HM Government (2015), [A Public Service Ombudsman: Government Response to Consultation](#).

At Citizens Advice, we see this widespread recognition of the importance of capturing complaints as a valuable opportunity to accelerate improvements, as well as prevent service failings.

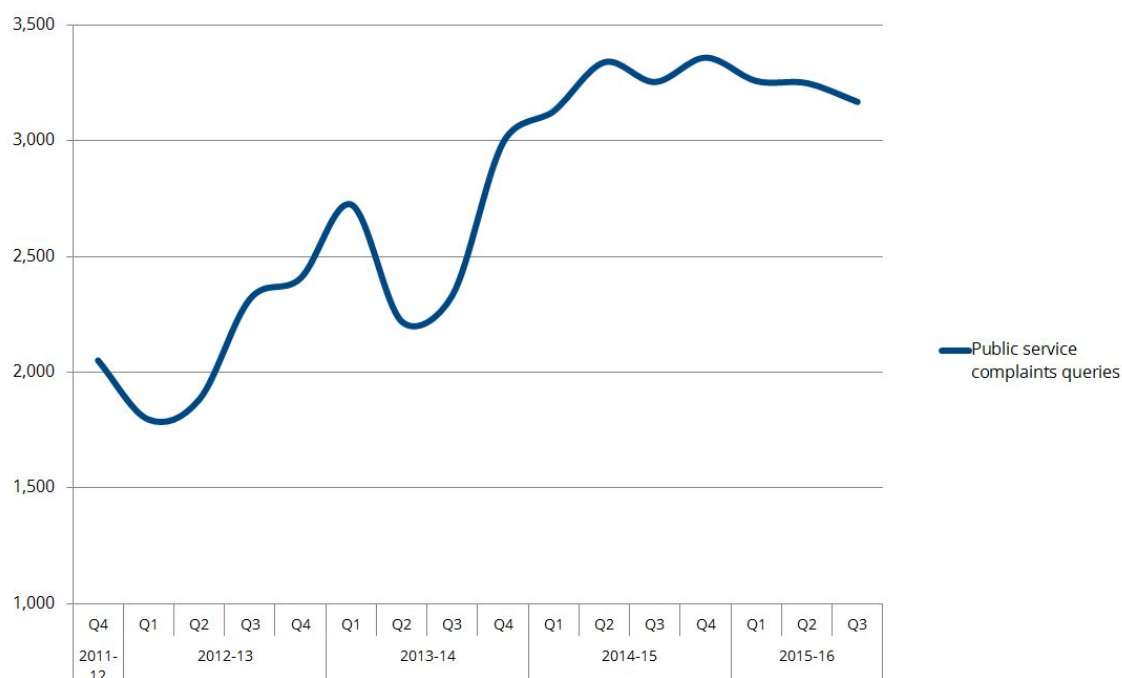
Citizens Advice data on public services

In the last year Citizens Advice provided face-to-face and phone advice to 2.5 million people from 2,500 locations in England and Wales, helping with 6.2 million advice issues.¹⁰ We record these issues to three tiers of detail, from a broad category like 'health' to a specific problem like 'registration with GPs'. We can analyse this data by postcode and often demographics and income.

We have seen a slow but steady increase in the number of queries about public services over the last four years, from an annual total of 104,674¹¹ to 116,790;¹² an increase of 12 per cent. Public services cover a number of advice categories across health (hospitals, general medical practice and dentists), education (schools), housing (local authority housing and homelessness services), social services (local authority) and tax issues.

Within this increase in public service queries, as Figure 1 shows, we have also seen a 63 per cent increase in the number of people coming to Citizens Advice for help making complaints against a range of public services, with 13,038 complaints queries recorded in the last year. We see 'customers' of public services struggling to get the services they need, and then struggling to complain when they don't.

Figure 1: Trend in public service complaints queries, Q4 2011-12 to Q3 2015-16¹³



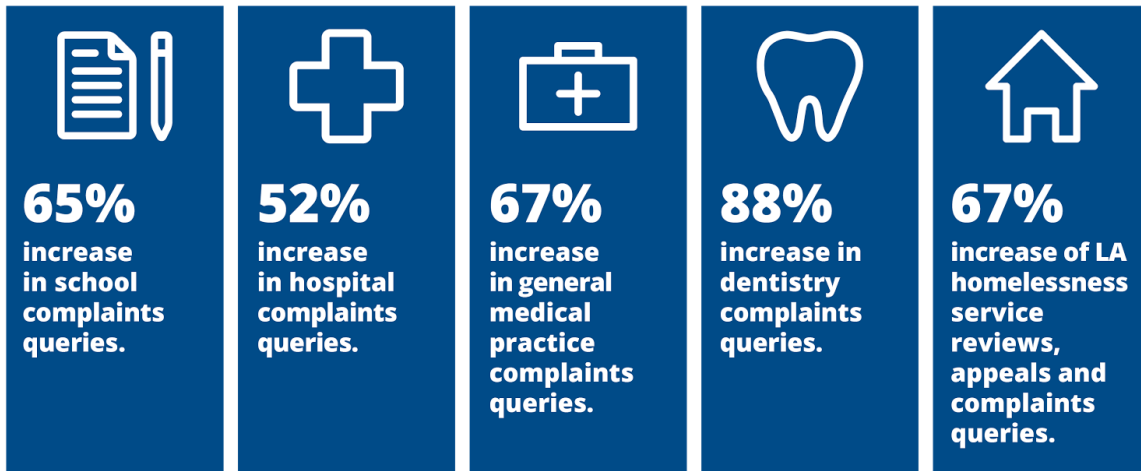
¹⁰ See Citizens Advice (2015), [The value of the Citizens Advice service: our impact in 2014/15](#).

¹¹ Q4 2011-12 to Q3 2012-13, England only.

¹² Q4 2014-15 to Q3 2015-16, England only.

¹³ Based on Citizens Advice advice issue code data for England only.

Particular public services for which complaints queries have increased significantly in this period include schools, hospitals, GP practices, dentists and local authority homelessness services.¹⁴



We gain further insight into public service complaints as partners of Healthwatch, the consumer champion for health and social care. Local Healthwatch consumer services were delivered through more than 80 local Citizens Advice offices in the last year, and Healthwatch England uses the data gathered to identify and comment on emerging issues.¹⁵ In our capacity as providers of Healthwatch services, we helped clients with 14,028 advice issues in the last year.

¹⁴ These individual complaints issue increases - represented in the infographic - include England and Wales.

¹⁵ Healthwatch (2014), [Suffering in Silence](#).

Chapter 2. Poor experiences with public services don't translate into formal complaints

“The majority of people are so busy living their lives. Initially they might be really angry or upset and be full of passion for pursuing this. And after a few weeks of just being messed around, they just give up. That’s exactly what they want us to do and that’s exactly what the plan is. They know if they mess people around for long enough that they’ll just give up. And unfortunately most people do because they’ve got lives to lead and things that they’d rather be doing than just complaining.”¹⁶

In this chapter, we examine how people register their frustration when they have a poor experience with a public service. We wanted to understand how people respond when they feel let down by their local GP surgery and how they express their dissatisfaction when they can't get through to HMRC. We know that many public services see low numbers of formal complaints. NAO research into public service complaints notes, for instance, that some social care providers receive “few complaints (often fewer than 5 a year)”.¹⁷

We see quite a different picture in the private sector. We know, for example, that in the last year the Financial Ombudsman Service, which handles top level consumer complaints against banks, mortgage lenders, insurance companies, ‘payday’ loan and other private finance providers, received 45 enquiries for every one received by the two main public service ombudsmen combined.¹⁸

Does this mean people are receiving excellent service from public services? Or does it mean that people are simply avoiding making formal complaints? In which case, are they turning to other channels to express their dissatisfaction?

To better understand this issue, we commissioned a nationally-representative Complaints Survey, asking people about their recent experiences with key public

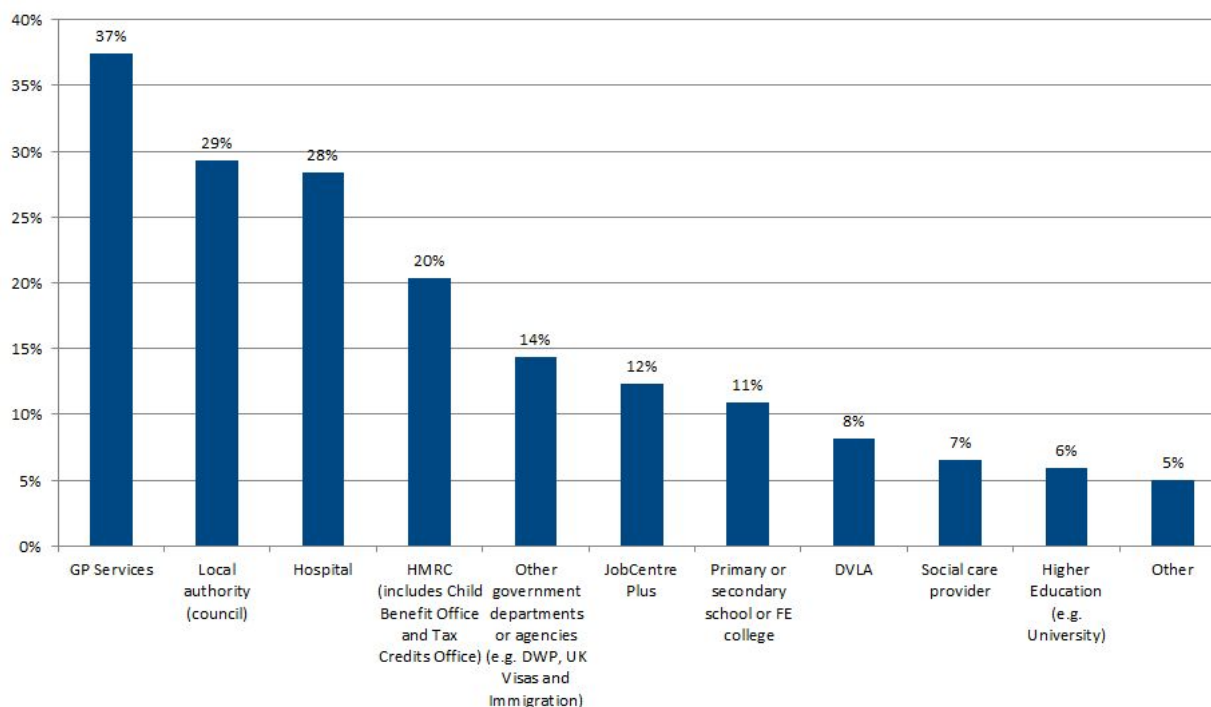
¹⁶ Complainant focus group participant and Citizens Advice client.

¹⁷ NAO (2015), [Public service markets: Putting things right when they go wrong](#).

¹⁸ The Financial Ombudsman Service received 1,786,973 enquiries in 2014/15, the Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman (PHSO), which deals with complaints about GPs, hospitals, and other NHS services as well as government departments like the DWP received 29,000 enquiries, and the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO), which is responsible for top level complaints about local councils and the services they offer, from social care providers (including independent and privately operated ones) and housing to refuse collection and libraries, received 11,094.

services, and about complaints. Our survey found that many people had been through a poor service experience with a public service recently. Nearly one in two (45 per cent) reported that they had “experienced poor service in the last two years when dealing with a public service provider”; this could include as many as 19 million people.¹⁹

Figure 2: Services people have had a poor experience with in the last two years²⁰



As Figure 2 shows, of those who reported a recent poor service experience, more than a third (37 per cent) had a poor experience with a GP service, while more than a quarter had experienced poor service from a local authority (29 per cent) or hospital (28 per cent) and one in five (20 per cent) had experienced poor service from HMRC.

Poor experiences don’t translate into formal complaints

Despite the high frequency of unsatisfactory public service experiences, we found that relatively few people actually go on to make a formal complaint. As Figure 3 shows, of those who had experienced poor service within the last two years, fewer than one in four (22 per cent²¹) told us that they went on to make a formal

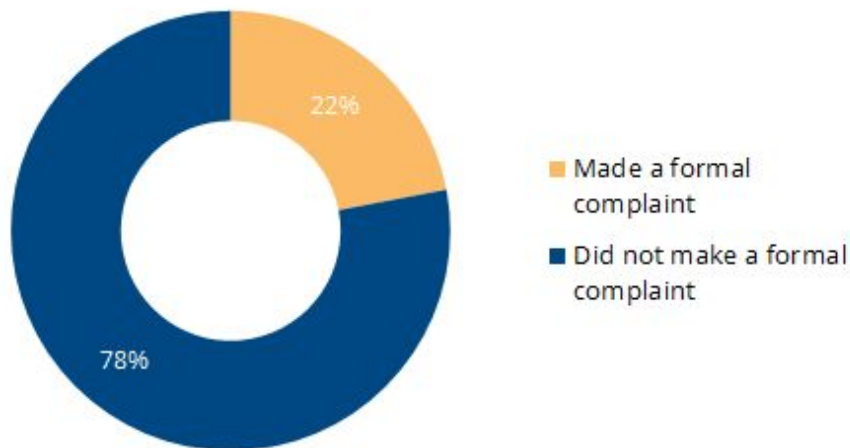
¹⁹ Based on [ONS population estimate](#) of 42,724,917 adults in England.

²⁰ Responses based upon the 45 per cent of Complaints Survey respondents who said they had “experienced poor service in the last two years when dealing with a public service provider”.

²¹ This is the net figure for all those who answered either “I made a formal complaint to the public service provider” or “I made a formal complaint to the public service provider and then escalated my complaint to an independent”.

complaint about the experience.²² This means as many as 15 million people may not have followed up their poor experience with a formal complaint.²³

Figure 3: Proportion of people who experienced poor public service in the last two years and made formal complaints²⁴



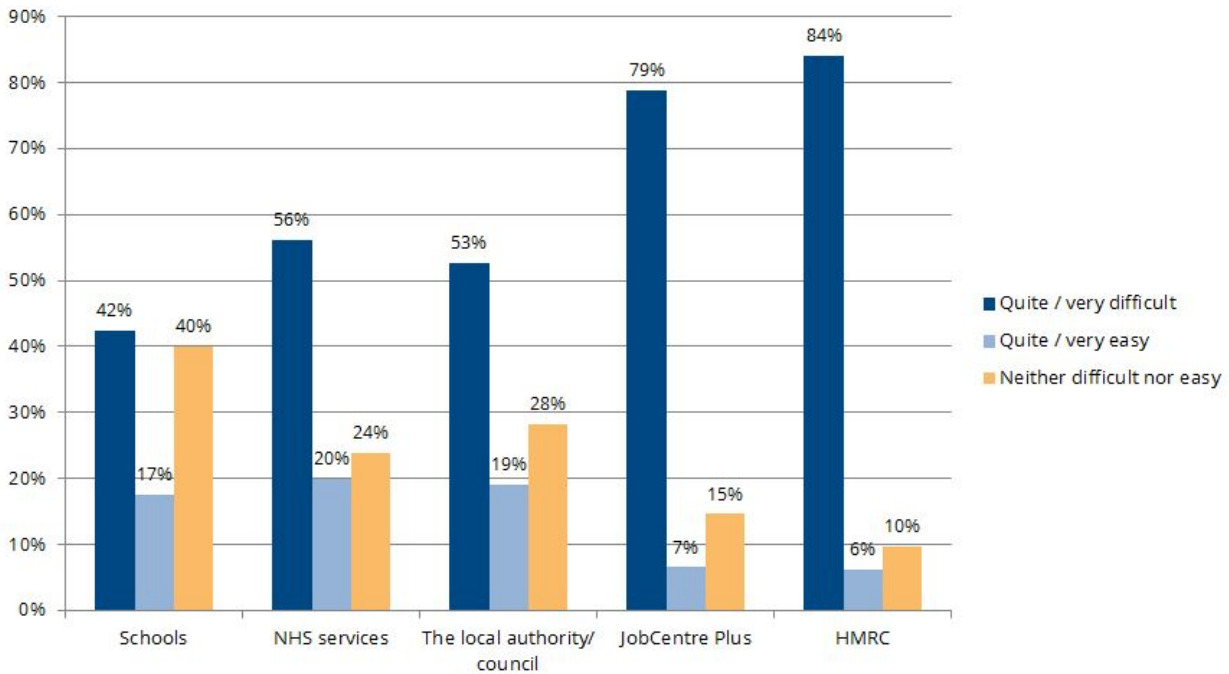
This finding is supported by the Citizens Advice Network Panel. More than one in two Network Panel respondents believed their clients would find it either 'quite difficult' or 'very difficult' to make a complaint about an NHS service (56 per cent) or local authority (53 per cent) and more than three-quarters said the same for JobCentre Plus (79 per cent) and HMRC (84 per cent).

²² Our research findings here correlate fairly closely with some of the insights offered by the PHSO's 2015 survey on public service complaints, which found that 34 per cent of people who experienced poor public service in the past 12 months went on to complain. However, whereas the PHSO found 27 per cent of respondents to their survey had experienced poor public service in total recently, our Complaints Survey - which asked respondents to tell us about experiences over a longer period, 24 months - found that 45 per cent had experienced poor service.

²³ Based on [ONS population estimate](#), 45 per cent of the adult population of England (proportion experiencing poor service) = 19,226,213 of which 22 per cent (4,229,767) did complain formally and 14,996,446 (78 per cent) did not.

²⁴ Responses based upon the 45 per cent of Complaints Survey respondents who said they had "experienced poor service in the last two years when dealing with a public service provider".

Figure 4: Network panel results: Ease or difficulty for Citizens Advice clients to make a complaint²⁵



People do complain, but not always through formal channels

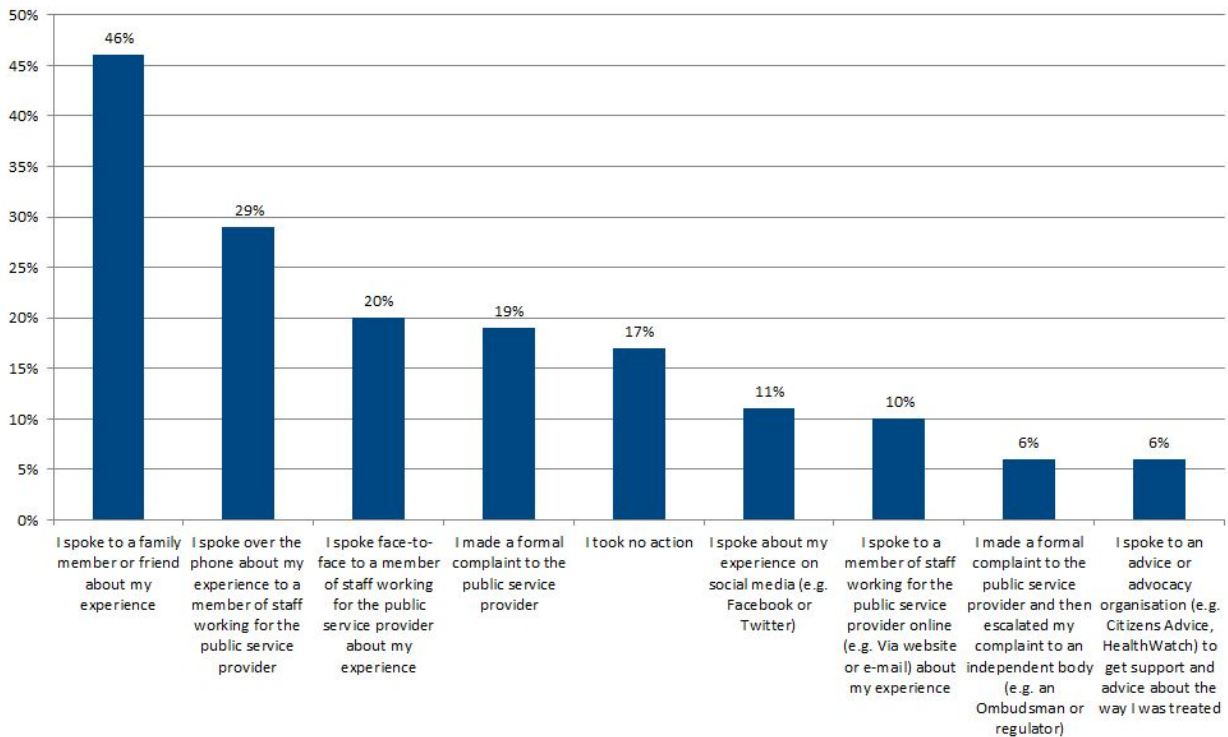
People are often reluctant to complain through formal channels after a poor public service experience, but this is not to say that people don't complain at all. In fact, we found that many people complain through less formal channels, with only a relatively small proportion (17 per cent) taking no action at all as a result of their experience.

As Figure 5 shows, of the people who told us that they had experienced poor public service from a provider in the last two years, nearly one in two (46 per cent) discussed their experience with friends or family, while around one third (29 per cent) spoke about their experience over the phone with staff at the service in question, and one in five (20 per cent) discussed their experience face-to-face with a member of staff at the service. Overall, we found that 73 per cent used informal channels to voice their frustrations, while 60 per cent *exclusively* used informal channels.²⁶ We also see digital channels emerging as popular methods of expressing frustration after poor public service, with social media and website or email contact with the public service each being cited by one in ten (11 per cent) respondents as the channel they used to discuss a poor experience.

²⁵ Based on all responses to the Citizens Advice Network Panel survey.

²⁶ 60 per cent is the net figure based upon all unique respondents who selected any response(s) excluding both formal complaint responses and 'I took no action'.

Figure 5: Action taken following a poor public service experience²⁷



But despite the popularity of informal complaints channels, most public services remain ill-equipped to capture intelligence from these sources. As one Citizens Advice client explained:

“All this paperwork is so outdated now, in the modern day that we live in. I honestly think if you’ve got an e-mail address you should be able to do things through e-mail because you can do things through their website if you like, you know you can do it online with the new Tax Credits form and whatnot, so you should be able to get in touch with them through the same website if you like. But you just can’t, and they don’t do emails either. The thing is you could speed up the process so much by doing that, you know?”

In the next chapter, we explore in greater detail how existing formal complaints processes can make it especially difficult for some people to make their public service complaints heard.

²⁷ Responses based upon the 45 per cent of Complaints Survey respondents who said they had “experienced poor service in the last two years when dealing with a public service provider”.

Chapter 3. The feedback and insight of specific groups is being missed

“We felt that nobody else could have done a great deal more than we did. They may have had a bigger stick than an independent person, but we weren’t a pushover, we weren’t letting things ride. God knows how it would happen if you weren’t any good at writing letters or emails. My mother-in-law couldn’t have done any of this for herself, it’s impossible, she’s 90 years old.”²⁸

Mistakes will always happen. People live messy, complicated lives and things in the real world do not always go according to plan. Public services are no exception. But when things do go wrong with public services people should have simple and accessible ways to register their frustration and contribute to improving the service for the future.

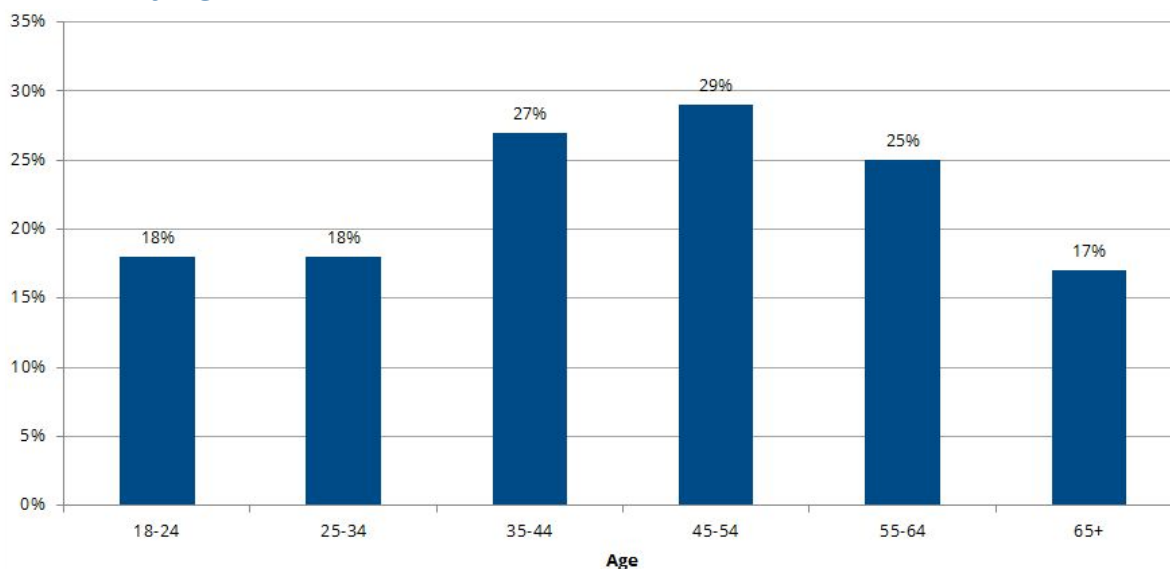
The previous chapter showed that, while poor experience of public services is common, few people go on to register this experience through a formal complaint. In this chapter, we explore who it is that does complain, and the reasons why others are not doing so.

Who formally complains?

We looked at the age profile of the 22 per cent of people who said they are willing and able to formally register their frustration after experiencing poor public service. People in this group are more likely to be aged 35-64, as Figure 6 shows.

²⁸ Citizens Advice client and interviewee.

Figure 6: People who made a formal complaint after experiencing poor public service, by age²⁹



Previous Citizens Advice research³⁰ also found that those with the highest household income are most likely to say that they would find a way to share their view if they experienced poor public service: almost half (44 per cent) of those with a household income of over £90,000 answered in this way,³¹ compared to just less than a third (32 per cent) across the whole income distribution. The PHSO has recognised that those on lower incomes are less likely to be aware of how to complain about poor service,³² which may help to explain why this group is more likely to come to Citizens Advice for advocacy support. One in four (26 per cent) of those who come to us for advice about a public service complaints issue are from the lowest income bracket, compared to only 7 per cent from the highest.³³ One possible implication of this is that we could be missing out on insights on particular services. The PHSO has found that health services account for four out of five (79 per cent) of complaints it receives, suggesting that other government services within its remit may be under-represented.³⁴

Why do most people avoid formally complaining?

Four out of five people (78 per cent) told us they *avoided* making a formal complaint when they had a poor experience with a public service. We found that

²⁹ Responses based upon the 22 per cent of those Complaints Survey respondents who said they “made a formal complaint” after their last poor public service experience. Total adds up to more than 100 per cent as respondents could select more than one answer. Making a formal complaint includes complaining formally to a public service provider and/or an independent body.

³⁰ Citizens Advice (2015), [Going with the grain: Why democracy needs to fit with modern life](#).

³¹ It should be noted that the numbers of respondents to our Civic Life Survey with a household income over £90,000 were small: only 55 people were in this group.

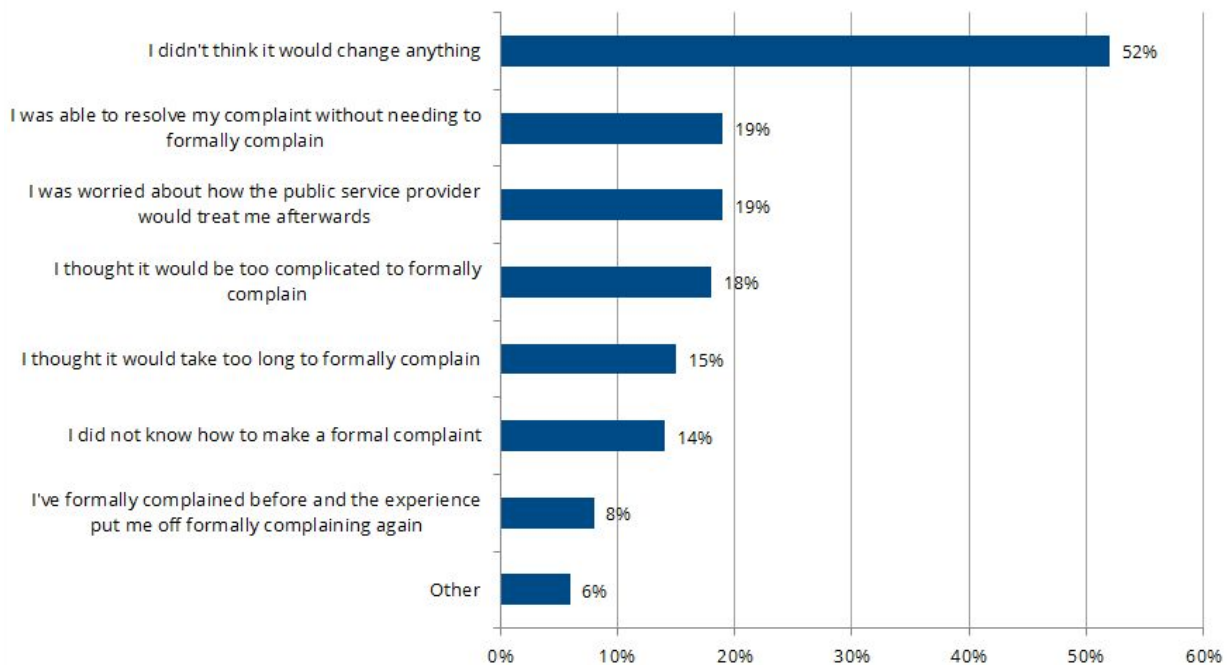
³² PHSO, [Complain for change](#).

³³ Based upon 2,853 unique complaints client records - where the client supplied income information - for the last year (Q4 2014-15 to Q3 2015-16). Lowest household income bracket is coded as <£400 pcm, highest as >£1999 pcm. While Citizens Advice clients are in general almost five times more likely to live on a low income than an average member of the UK population, in the same period, the proportion of clients in the lowest bracket across all advice issue areas was 22 per cent, with 9 per cent in the highest.

³⁴ PHSO, [Annual Report and Accounts 2013-14](#).

only one in five (19 per cent) said this was because they were able to resolve their problem without needing to complain. As Figure 7 shows, a variety of less positive reasons explain why people do not make a formal complaint when they have a poor experience with public services.

Figure 7: Reasons for not complaining after experiencing poor public service



Using evidence from our Complaints Survey, our Civic Life Survey, and interviews with Citizens Advice clients and advisers, we were able to explore people's attitudes towards the complaints systems in more depth. We identify four broad reasons which offer insight into why people don't complain.

1. Many people don't think their complaint will be heard and taken seriously

Over half (52 per cent) of respondents to our Complaints Survey said they did not complain because they 'didn't think it would change anything'. As one Citizens Advice client commented:

"Speaking to the council is like speaking to a brick wall. They just need to listen. They need to use the advice the public can give them to improve things and do things right instead of wasting money and doing things wrong."³⁵

We also asked people what would help them to make a formal complaint against a public service provider in the future. 69 per cent said it was 'knowing that my complaint would be taken seriously', which suggests that people are not safe in this knowledge at the moment. Older respondents are more likely to suggest that increased faith in the system would help them complain; 75 per cent of over 65s felt this way, compared with 61 per cent of 18-24 year olds. Older people are also

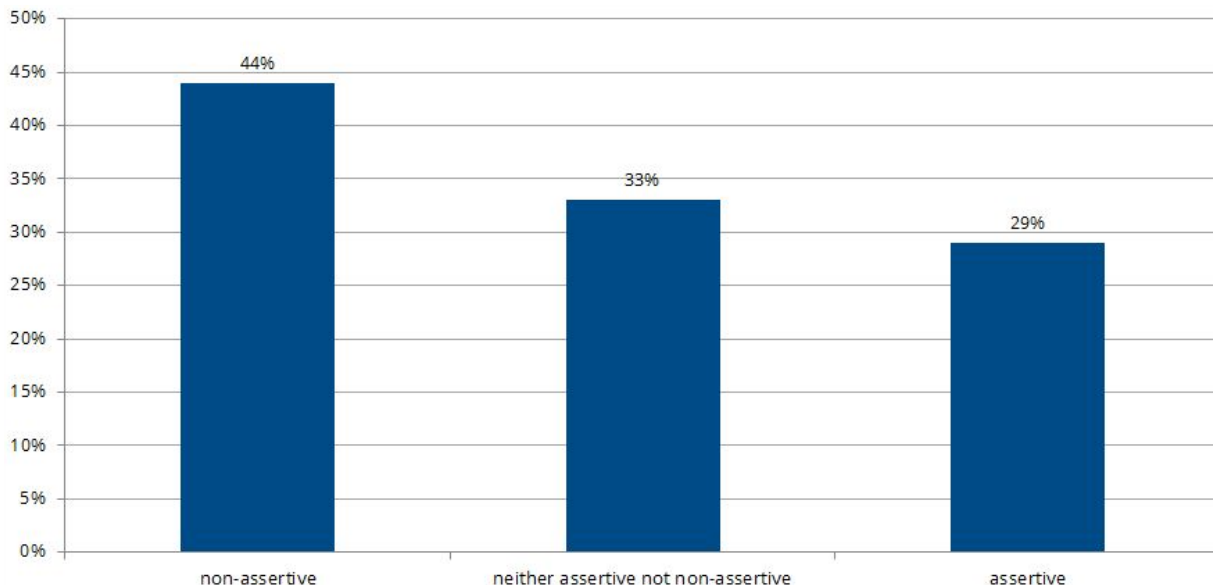
³⁵ Citizens Advice client and interviewee.

more likely to say that advocacy support would help them to feel that they would be heard and taken seriously. While one in four (26 per cent) respondents to our Complaints Survey say 'support from an advice or advocacy organisation' would help them to complain in the future, this rises to almost a third (32 per cent) amongst the over 65s.

2. People don't always feel confident enough to make a formal complaint - especially those in older age or on lower incomes

Previous Citizens Advice research has explored the relationship between different personality types and attitudes to engagement with civic and public life.³⁶ As Figure 8 shows, we found that people who consider themselves less assertive are also less likely to think that systems for complaining about public services are working well.

Figure 8: People who think the current systems for making a complaint about public services are not working well, by assertiveness³⁷



Responses to our Complaints Survey confirmed the importance of assertiveness when it comes to formally registering your frustration about poor public service. Amongst those who had experienced poor public service in the past two years but did not complain, 19 per cent highlighted worries about how the public service provider would treat them afterwards as their reason for not feeding back about their experience. This rises to a quarter (26 per cent) amongst those with a household income of up to £14,000, compared to just 7 per cent amongst those with a household income of £41,001 or more.

For those on lower incomes, who may be more reliant on public services, complaining about poor public or council service can seem a forbidding prospect. As one Citizens Advice client put it:

³⁶ Citizens Advice (2015), [Going with the grain: Why democracy needs to fit with modern life](#).

³⁷ Responses based on the 34 per cent of respondents to the Civic Life Survey who said that the systems for making a complaint about a public or council service are not working well and need to improve

“There is a weird connection between certain things. You think if you complain about something it might impact on something else that you are claiming. If you're complaining say about the Jobcentre will it have an impact on how they decide on your case in the future? Will it have an impact on how you are treated? It's not very clear whether things are confidential.”

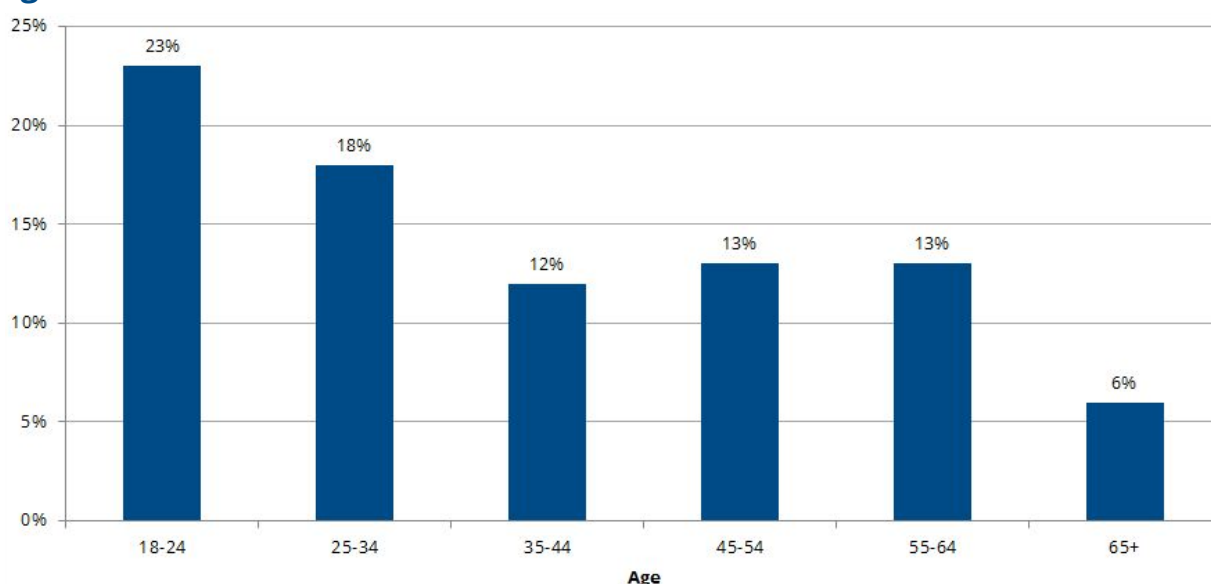
Four out of ten (41 per cent) respondents to our Complaints Survey highlighted ‘Knowing I would not be treated differently by the public service provider as a result of my complaint’ as a way to help them to complain about poor public service in the future. Older people were more likely to see this as important; 47 per cent of over 65s said this would help them complain in the future, compared to 37 per cent of 18-24 year olds.

3. Not everyone knows how to make a formal complaint

Providing insight which could help improve public services for the future should be simple and straightforward. But this is not always the case with the current complaints landscape.

Among our non-complainants, 14 per cent said they ‘did not know how to make a formal complaint’. As Figure 9 shows, younger people are more likely to cite insufficient knowledge as the reason for not complaining: 23 per cent of 18-24 year olds gave this reason, falling to 6 per cent amongst the over 65s.

Figure 9: Percentage who didn't complain because they didn't know how, by age³⁸



These findings correlate with previous research which has highlighted low awareness of ombudsmen services.³⁹ Furthermore, even when people are aware of

³⁸ Responses based upon the 14 per cent of those Complaints Survey respondents who said they didn't make a formal complaint after their last poor public service experience because 'I did not know how to make a formal complaint'.

³⁹ NAO (2015), [Public service markets: Putting things right when they go wrong](#).

the different ombudsmen, they are frequently uncertain of the process. Of the 29,000 new cases the PHSO handled last year, the majority (66 per cent) were referred back to other organisations or for local resolution (which must be exhausted before an ombudsman can consider a complaint), suggesting a widespread lack of knowledge of how the system works.⁴⁰ A top level complaints system which 'bounces back' the majority of people is not only frustrating, but also costly and inefficient.

4. Making a formal complaint can be too complicated and time consuming, especially for younger people

Knowing how to make a formal complaint does not necessarily mean you'll be encouraged to make one. Many think formally complaining will be too burdensome. Amongst the respondents to our Complaints Survey who had experienced poor public service in the past two years but did not complain formally, 18 per cent said they 'thought it would be too complicated'. This rises to 29 per cent amongst 18-24 year olds, the highest of all age groups.

The length of time it takes to complain also puts people off from complaining. 15 per cent of respondents said they avoided making a formal complaint about a poor experience with a public service because they thought it would take too long. Again, 18-24 year olds were the age group most likely to say that they did not complain because it would take too long, with 30 per cent giving this reason.

As a Citizens Advice adviser responding to our Network Panel Survey remarked: "Complaint procedures are complicated for clients to understand and take far too long." One Citizens Advice client we interviewed captured the sense of irritation generated by the formal complaints procedure particularly well:

"As soon as you start engaging in... complaining to a council, all of a sudden it becomes a full-time job because they know all of the loopholes and they can twist you back and forward and have you run all over the place looking for your own information."

Furthermore, escalating a complaint can also be difficult. For example, after exhausting local resolution, a complainant must contact their MP in order to register a (non-health) complaint with the PHSO. This can be very frustrating. As one Citizens Advice client told us:

"I rang the ombudsman and I said 'look, what happens if they've been so slow at resolving this, or at least even looking at it, surely you must be able to...' and he said 'no'."

⁴⁰ PHSO (2015), [The Ombudsman's Annual Report and Accounts 2014-15](#).

The PHSO itself recognises that “direct access is generally seen as an essential feature of a modern ombudsman institution”, while “not being able to access an ombudsman directly is seen as having an adverse impact on a complainant”.⁴¹

The diversity of reasons people give for not formally registering their frustration means that, in order to better harness the insights of all people, public service providers need to look to multiple channels for people to express dissatisfaction after being poorly served and explore new, untapped sources of complaints. We turn to this in Chapter 4.

⁴¹ PHSO (2011), [Consultation on direct access to the Parliamentary Ombudsman](#).

Chapter 4. Untapped potential and new sources of complaints intelligence: case studies from social media

“And really what social media does, I think, is it turns it on its head because in the past it's always been that councils and big corporations have the power to bamboozle you. Whereas you can turn the volume of people into the problem for them. I think it turns the tables a little bit”.⁴²

This chapter explores the potential benefits of aggregating data from a range of complaints channels. These include identifying trends in consumer experience of a particular public service and using this analysis to drive improvements, as well as prevent service failures.

There is currently no aggregation of complaints data across the public service ombudsmen, and this aggregation is not something the ombudsmen are equipped to do. The NAO found “no standard approach to recording or reporting on complaints. Data cannot be aggregated beyond each organisation to identify emerging trends in complaints, or analyse the user’s perspective”.⁴³ But to get the greatest insights from complaints data, we must also look beyond formal complaints to less formal routes and outlets.

Box 1. The value of aggregation: Identifying policy impacts in advice trends

At Citizens Advice, we understand the value of data aggregation. Our dedicated volunteer advisers helped 2.5 million clients last year, providing support, advice and advocacy at more than 2,500 local Citizens Advice offices and outreach locations on more than 6.2 million advice issues.

The ability to record and aggregate this detailed advice issue data across the service provides us with a unique breadth and depth of insight into the issues people face. It also means we are able to identify emerging issues across a range of social policy areas and point to potential policy solutions.

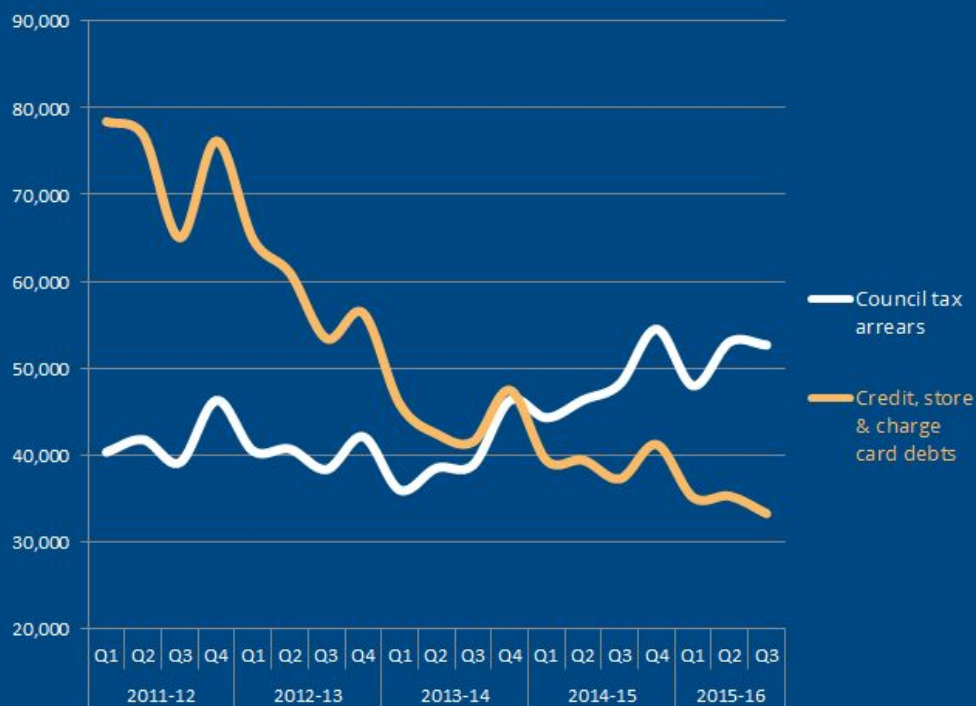
For example, nationally aggregated advice query data from local Citizens Advice

⁴² Citizens Advice client and interviewee.

⁴³ NAO (2015), [Public service markets: Putting things right when they go wrong](#).

offices across the country recently alerted us to an upsurge in Council Tax debt queries. Since the Government's replacement of Council Tax Benefit with a local model of Council Tax Support in 2013, Council Tax arrears have overtaken credit card debt as the number one debt problem our clients seek help with. This has given us significant insight into the challenges of the current Council Tax Support model, as well as some examples of better practice, and has fed into our response to the Government review into Council Tax Support, launched in December 2015.⁴⁴

Figure 10: Council tax debt and credit card debt advice queries



Case studies from social media: Exploring how complaints data can be identified and aggregated

In this section, we look at social media as a potential new source of rapid intelligence on lower level complaints and we use this as a case study to explore the wider benefits of aggregating complaints data.

The best of the private sector is acutely aware of the value of social media in improving customer experience. The Institute of Customer Service suggests that “one in four social media users in the UK used platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Google+ to make a complaint over the past 3 months”.⁴⁵ The Office for Rail Regulation recently highlighted good practice by train companies like Greater Anglia, which uses Twitter complaints intelligence to “construct a daily log of categories of passenger issues” so managers can see issues faced by passengers ‘on the ground’, and London Midland, which responds to every tweet directed at it

⁴⁴ Citizens Advice (2016), [Review into local council tax support: Citizens Advice response](#).

⁴⁵ Institute of Customer Service (2015), [Customer complaints see 8-fold rise on social media](#).

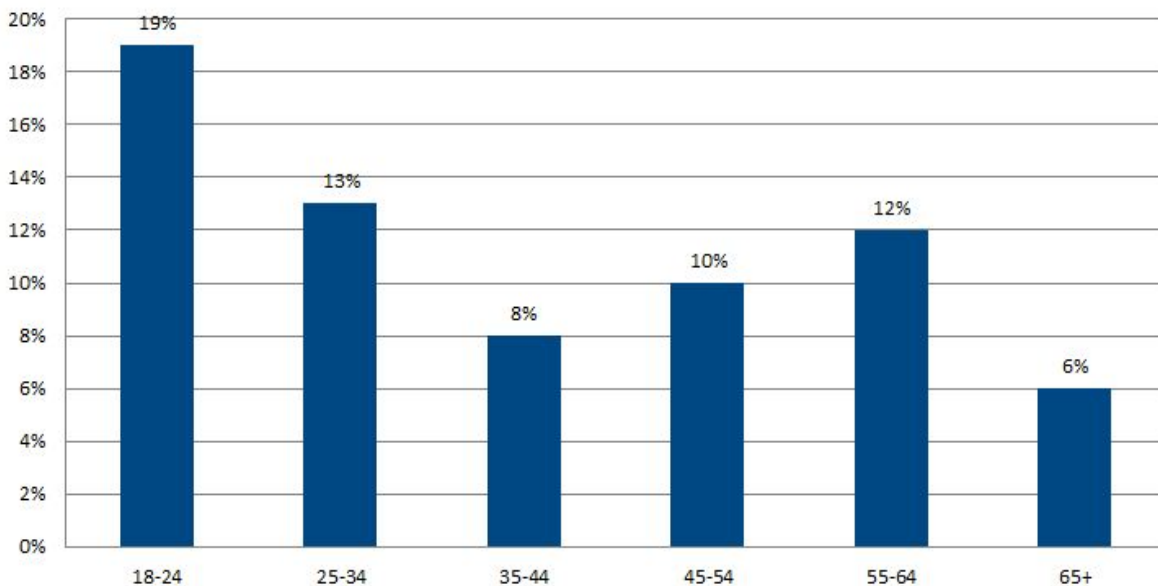
and “welcomes the benefits of a quick, manageable message size” and the “quicker identification of issues” it enables.⁴⁶

Some public service providers are taking steps in this direction. The DWP has stated that making “better use” of big data is core to its “vision to create more efficient services”,⁴⁷ and most recently the Chair of the Care Quality Commission (CQC) highlighted social media complaints data as a potential source of “early intelligence” on emerging service issues.⁴⁸ If, like the best of the private sector, public services like HMRC or the NHS, could collect and interpret feedback received through social media, it might be possible to better identify problems with their services as they emerge, and to identify suitable solutions.

Social media as an informal channel for complaints

Our Complaints Survey revealed that one in ten people (11 per cent) turn to social media after poor public service experiences. The figure nearly doubles, to one in five (19 per cent) amongst people in the 18-24 age bracket.

Figure 11: Proportion of people who complained about poor public service on social media, by age group⁴⁹



As tomorrow’s middle aged people, younger people provide us with insight into how people’s preferences overall are likely to shift over time. While social media currently appeals more to those in the 18-24 bracket we can anticipate that usage of this complaints channel will grow in popularity.⁵⁰

Tweeting complaints at public services

⁴⁶ ORR (2014), [Passenger engagement: How train operators listen to their passengers](#).

⁴⁷ DWP (2016), [The appliance of data science](#).

⁴⁸ Laura Donnelly (2016), [NHS will monitor Facebook for comment about hospitals, says new CQC head](#).

⁴⁹ Responses based upon the 11 per cent of those Complaints Survey respondents who said they “spoke about my experience on social media (e.g. Facebook or Twitter)” after their last poor public service experience.

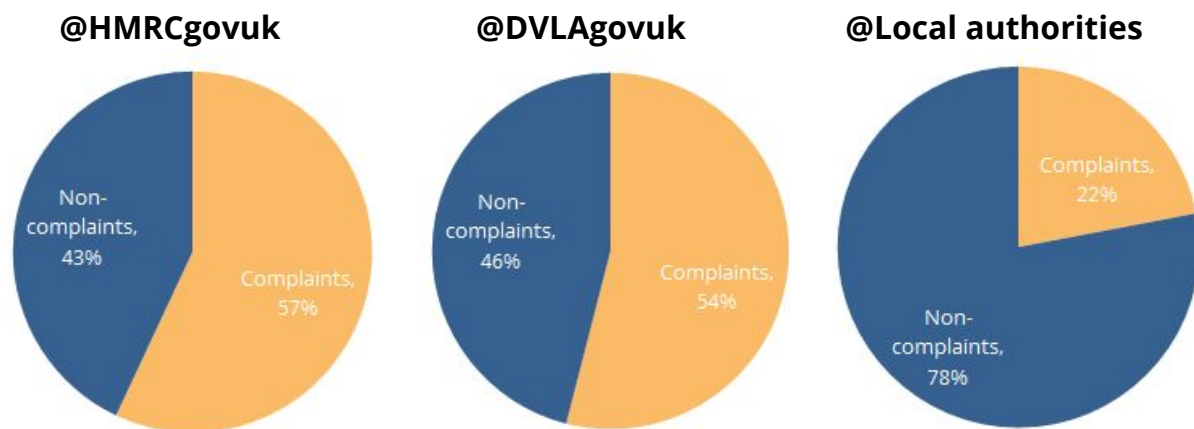
⁵⁰ See Ofcom (2015), [Adults’ Media Use and Attitudes](#).

We chose to look at three services to explore the possible benefits of social media analysis. Using natural language processing to design a series of algorithms, we examined all tweets over the course of a year directed at HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and 345 local authorities across England. Our research uncovered a total of 114,273 complaints directed at these services.⁵¹ Our aim was to understand how many of these tweets could be classified as complaints, and what sorts of public service issues people complain about on social media.

Case study finding 1: Lots of complaints are made through social media

Our research identified 114,273 complaint tweets aimed at just three public services over the course of a year. We found that both HMRC and DVLA's twitter accounts attract more complaints than tweets of any other kind. Nearly six out of ten tweets (57 per cent) directed at HMRC represented a complaint and over half (54 per cent) of tweets mentioning DVLA were complaints.

Figure 12: Proportion of complaints amongst all 'at mentions' of public services⁵²



Case study finding 2: Most complaints through Twitter are about low level frustrations

We found that people typically use Twitter to register low level service complaints relating to communication failure (whether over the phone, in writing, online, or face-to-face), administrative errors, delays, and other everyday frustrations. People were less likely to use Twitter to complain about 'high level' policy issues or very serious 'life and death' service issues.

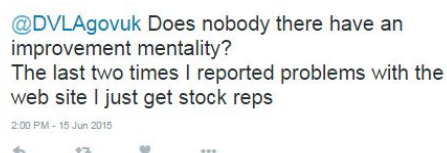
Figure 13: Examples of tweeted public service complaints

Hey @lambeth_council, we're trying to recycle but you haven't posted us recycling bags and none in Town Hall/Customer Centre either
9:40 AM - 27 Aug 2015

@aylesburyvale Your new website seems to purposely block people from finding a no. to contact you by phone. Disappointing as a local service
1:05 AM - 7 Aug 2015

⁵¹ See Methodology for details.

⁵² Based upon NLP analysis of 441,172 tweets 'at mentioning' these services between August 2014 and August 2015.



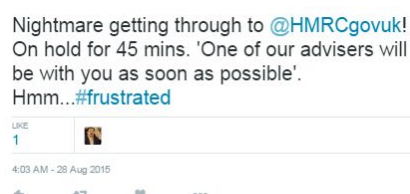
@DVLAgovuk Does nobody there have an improvement mentality? The last two times I reported problems with the web site I just get stock reps

2:00 PM - 15 Jun 2015



@DVLAgovuk Your website is down...

9:41 AM - 27 Aug 2015



Nightmare getting through to @HMRCgovuk! On hold for 45 mins. 'One of our advisers will be with you as soon as possible'. Hmm...#frustrated

4:03 AM - 28 Aug 2015



@HMRCgovuk 52 minutes on hold just to be cut off 🙄

3:24 AM - 28 Aug 2015

The vast majority of complaint tweets directed to HMRC and DVLA are about low level service problems. 78 per cent of all complaints directed at HMRC, and 82 per cent of those directed at DVLA, were about these service issues.

It was harder to generate such a distinction when examining local authorities.⁵³ However, 22 per cent of complaint tweets were about waste and cleanliness issues, and three per cent were about parking. We would generally classify these as low level service issues too.

Our findings here are perhaps not surprising. It can be difficult to know where to turn when you experience poor low level or 'customer' service from a public service, as opposed to a more serious or high level failure.

Case study finding 3: Social media data aggregation can help identify specific and 'real time' emerging service issues

12,588 complaints directed at HMRC were about their telephone helpline services; that amounts to more than one in three (37 per cent) of all tweets mentioning them. Of these helpline complaints, 91 per cent - 11,465 tweets - were about time waiting on hold or for a call to be picked up. This shows how aggregating complaints data could help inform service improvements; had HMRC monitored this issue as it emerged in real-time on social media, it may have been able to introduce more call handlers at an earlier stage.⁵⁴

Similarly, 1,594 tweets directed at the DVLA were about service user frustrations with the agency's website or e-mail service. DVLA could systematically monitor this data, enabling the quick reporting of downtime and other issues to its web team to achieve a speedy resolution.

Studying tweets mentioning local authorities, which are responsible for delivering a much wider range of services than HMRC and the DVLA, we found that around half of all the complaints about waste and cleanliness were specifically about domestic refuse collections. Local authorities could be using this data to find out when and

⁵³ See Methodology for discussion of the limits to categorising data using machine learning techniques.

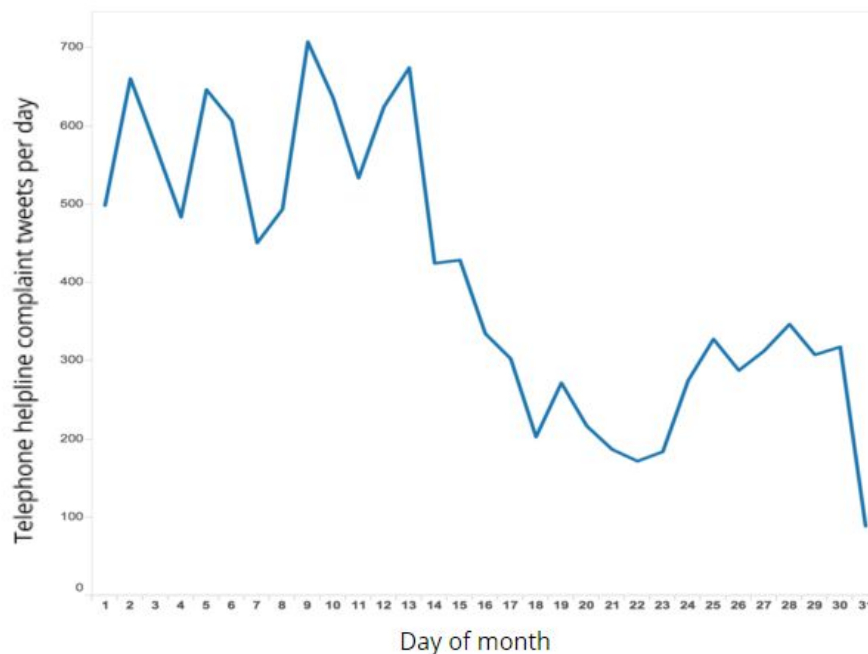
⁵⁴ HMRC [announced in June 2015](#) that thousands of staff were being recruited to its customer service teams to improve telephone helpline services.

where collections have been missed, or incorrect bins supplied, so they can quickly remedy these issues before people become frustrated.

While our analysis looked at static, retrospective data, it is possible to apply these NLP algorithms on an ongoing basis, collecting and analysing live data. This would allow for frequent checks, in real time, on emerging complaints themes and the service issues causing complaints at a given time.⁵⁵

For example, we found that far more complaints about telephone helplines are directed at HMRC in the first two weeks of each month, as Figure 14 shows. While there are many possible explanations for the pattern - from people's behaviour around tax issues to the dates of tax credits payments - the solution is clear; HMRC needs increased staffing and capacity on its helplines in the first half of each month.

Figure 14: Telephone helpline complaint tweets @HMRCgovuk, by day of the month, aggregated across 12 months⁵⁶

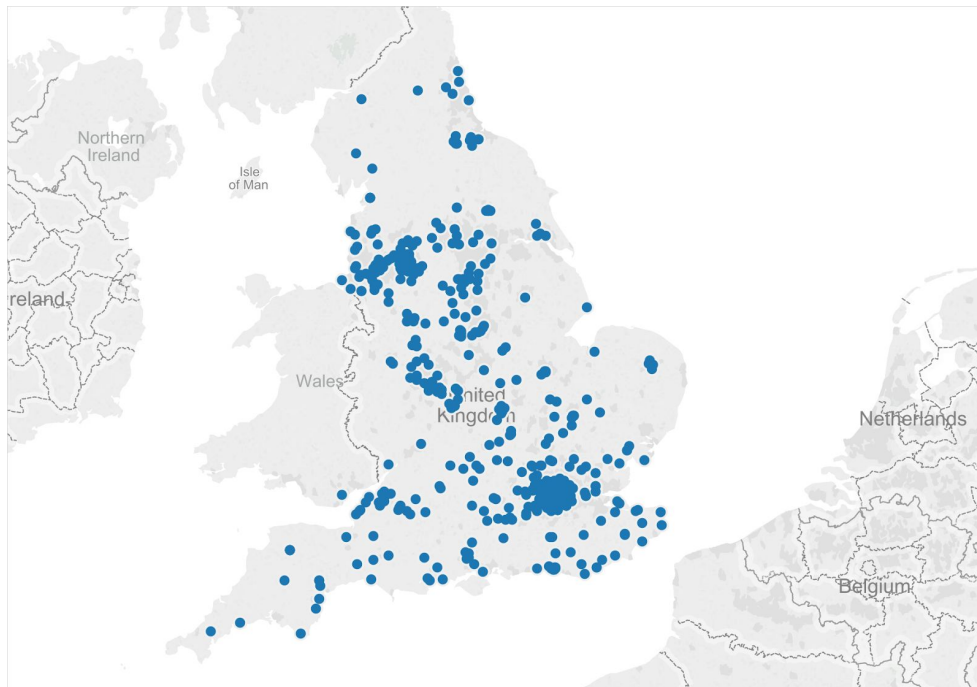


Apart from collecting data on a single service like HMRC or the DVLA, social media analysis allows for the aggregation of complaints across services. We were able to use our data on complaints about domestic waste collection issues to produce the map in Figure 15, which shows where these problems are most acute. Unsurprisingly, complaints are heavily clustered around population centres such as London, Birmingham, Manchester and Newcastle, but smaller clusters of complaints about these waste issues can be identified elsewhere in England.

⁵⁵ The ability to identify real time emerging issues and trends from our clients' advice queries is central to our

⁵⁶ Based upon NLP analysis of the 64 per cent of all complaints tweets mentioning HMRC that were about telephone helplines.

Figure 15: Map of tweets complaining to local authorities in England about domestic refuse collection⁵⁷



Box 2. Good practice case study: Local authorities

Some public service providers are leading the way in terms of good practice, using social media, crowd-sourced and aggregated data to improve their services.

Of 345 English local authority Twitter accounts we looked at, nearly one in two (44 per cent) takes a proactive approach, explaining in their profile how and when the account is monitored, and in some cases positively encouraging feedback. Local authorities such as Basildon and Brentwood state they will respond to all queries from the public within 48 hours, with named staff signing-off messages. However, the approach is uneven, with other local authorities effectively using their Twitter account for 'broadcast' only.

Some local authorities use 'crowd-sourced' data from the public to log and respond to local problems like potholes or fly-tipping. Websites and mobile apps like FillThatHole (run by cyclists' advocacy group CTC) allow users to plot potholes on a map, automatically informing the relevant council, while Glasgow City Council's 'MyGlasgow' app allows users to log a range of unique issues - from street lighting to parking - on a map, avoiding duplicate recording.⁵⁸

Local authorities working closely with local Citizens Advice offices provide another example of good practice. For instance, following a number of complaints about housing benefit administration, Southwark Council worked with its local Citizens

⁵⁷ Based upon NLP analysis of the 50 per cent of all waste complaint tweets mentioning local authorities that were about domestic refuse service issues.

⁵⁸ LGIU (2014), [Technology and transformation in town halls](#).

Advice to explore how to deal with debt and vulnerable clients. This close working has enabled the council to learn from the feedback we provide on behalf of our clients and use that insight to improve services.

The aggregation and analysis of complaints data from social media in our case studies highlights the potential for public service complaints aggregation more broadly. By collecting, interpreting and acting on real time feedback from service users, public services can become more responsive and efficient, and the experience of users can be improved.

Chapter 5. Towards more open and responsive public services: Recommendations and opportunities

The current systems in place for capturing public service complaints are in need of urgent overhaul. Important changes are already underway, and we welcome the Government's proposals to simplify the ombudsman system for handling top level formal complaints. But bringing together the public service ombudsmen alone will not solve many of the issues we see people struggle with when they navigate complaints processes. Through our research, we identify a number of important opportunities:

- **There should be no 'wrong door' when people want to make a complaint.** All types of complaints offer valuable insight, but not every complaint can go through formal processes or to an ombudsman. The Government should ensure we capture complaints from everyone:
 - Certain groups and individuals don't feel that they have the necessary resources - be that time, knowledge or social capital - to go through the formal complaints processes. By improving and broadening the range of complaints channels people can use, we can enhance our understanding of service failings and accelerate improvements. This should include removing unhelpful layers, such as the 'MP filter' on non-health complaints to the PHSO.
 - Some types of complaint are not serious enough - in terms of individual service user detriment - to warrant the time and effort needed for a formal complaint, but must nevertheless be captured and acted on by public services where their volume indicates an emerging trend or problem. This requires a widening of what services consider 'legitimate' complaint routes.
- **Public bodies should develop better insight and intelligence capabilities on emerging service issues through big data aggregation.** Aggregating data across services allows for the development of a more complete national picture of emerging issues. New communications technologies and digital social networks present a real opportunity to draw upon as yet untapped pools of complaint data that should be fed back into service design. Our own

analysis highlights how social media can offer insight into potential service improvements, allowing the real time identification of service problems - from helpline overload and website downtime to missed refuse collections and administrative errors. Monitoring social media complaints means working with how people *actually do* complain, rather than how services might want them to.

- **Public service providers need to modernise their complaints culture and empower frontline staff.** Too often, as our polling and interviews show, service users are left feeling that public service providers either won't respond or will 'close ranks' when faced with a complaint. Frontline public service staff must be enabled to handle more service issues directly; only one in five (19 per cent) of people told us they did not pursue a formal complaint because they were able to resolve their complaint without needing to do this. This will enable ongoing learning and improvements within public services.
- **People should be able to complain to a single point of contact.** Our research highlighted the difficulties people face understanding whether and when to escalate their complaint. Public service ombudsmen are forced to turn away a significant proportion of the enquiries they receive or refer them back to 'local resolution'. A triage system would provide a 'one-stop shop' to capture and categorise people's complaints, directing to the right place, whether local resolution or an ombudsman. This system would improve the customer experience, reducing costly duplication within the system, while also providing further useful data on public service performance.
- **People should have access to an independent, impartial organisation for help with their complaint.** One in four people (26 per cent) told us they would be more likely to complain about poor public service with 'support from an advice or advocacy organisation', a figure that rises to nearly one in three (32 per cent) among people aged 65+. Some potential complainants will be reliant upon the public service in question for their health and wellbeing, and will therefore be concerned about complaining without independent support. One in five non-complainants (19 per cent) cite fear of reprisal as a reason for not complaining. This anxiety is especially pronounced amongst older people and those on lower incomes.
- **The power to raise 'super complaints' on behalf of public service users should be introduced.** In the private sector, super complaints - like the one Citizens Advice raised on the mis-selling of payment protection insurance (PPI) - have been instrumental in achieving sector-wide reforms for the benefit of all consumers by drawing attention to systemic problems. Public service users must also be afforded this high-level representation, advocacy and redress to improve service quality.

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Ben Whitham, Temi Ogunye and Lizzie Greenhalgh.



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