



**NORTHERN IRELAND AMBULANCE SERVICE**

# **ANNUAL COMPLAINTS REPORT**

# **2021/22**



Northern Ireland Ambulance Service  
Health and Social Care Trust



# Complaints & Compliments

## Annual Report 2021-2022

### Foreword



The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service HSC Trust (NIAS) recognises the importance of feedback received from our patients, patient's relatives, carers, advocates and

other service users as a driver for learning and continuous improvement. As the Director of Quality, Safety and Improvement, responsible for service user feedback received by NIAS, I am very pleased to present the annual report for complaints and compliments received during 2021/2022.

NIAS aims to promote a culture where all concerns and complaints are received positively, investigated promptly and thoroughly, responded to sympathetically and that actions are taken to prevent recurrence when services provided have fallen below acceptable standards. Such learning is key to achieving excellence in pre-hospital care and improving the experience of those who use our services.

We also value each compliment received and appreciate the time taken by those people who want to share their positive experience of the services we provide. The positive feedback received from compliments also helps us further enhance our performance, the patient experience and the quality of services we provide.

Like our colleagues across Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, during 2021/2022 NIAS faced unprecedented challenges in the form of the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic and the system wide pressures this created. As our complaints are investigated by the same senior frontline staff who were managing these system wide pressures, our ability to respond to our complaints within the 20 day timeframe set by the Department of Health was, therefore, significantly impacted, with only 17% of complaints being completed within this timeframe. We remain committed to improving this.

Behind the numbers contained in this report are many patient experiences and it is always deeply regrettable when we fall short of the high standards strived for. However, despite the challenges highlighted above, during 2021/2022 NIAS retained low complaint rates at 0.08% of all (326,300) emergency and non-emergency ambulance attendances.

**Lynne Charlton**  
Director of Quality, Safety and Improvement

## Facts & Figures

In the year 2021/2022:

**200,969** emergency calls received (13% decrease on previous year)

**179,424** emergency responses (3% increase)

**1461,876** non-emergency journeys (11% increase)

**266** complaints were received (75% increase on previous year). This represents a complaint rate of **0.08%** of all (326,300) emergency and non-emergency ambulance attendances.

**97%** acknowledged within 2 working days (10% increase on previous year)

**265** complaints were closed (93% increase on previous year)

**17%** of complaints were responded to within 20 working days (3% decrease on previous year)

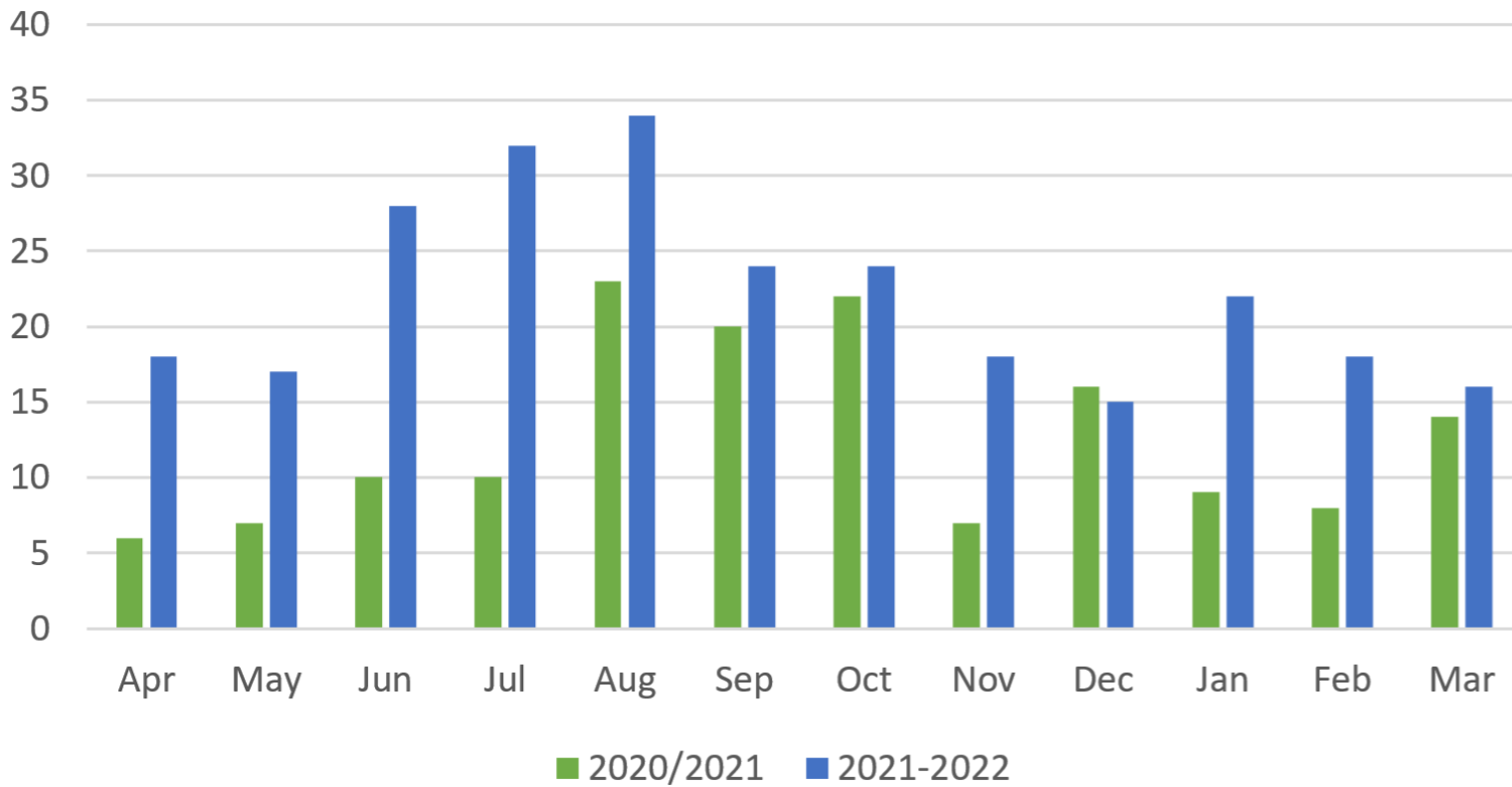
**3** top issues of complaint were Transport (Late or Non-Arrival/ Journey Time), Staff Attitude/ Behaviour & Quality of Treatment & Care

**375** compliments were received 74% increase



# Complaints This Year

During the past year (2021/2022), the Trust received **266** complaints, which is an increase of **75%** on the previous year's total of **152**.



As shown in the graph, there is a contrast in complaints received during 21/22 from 20/21 for the months of June, July & August.

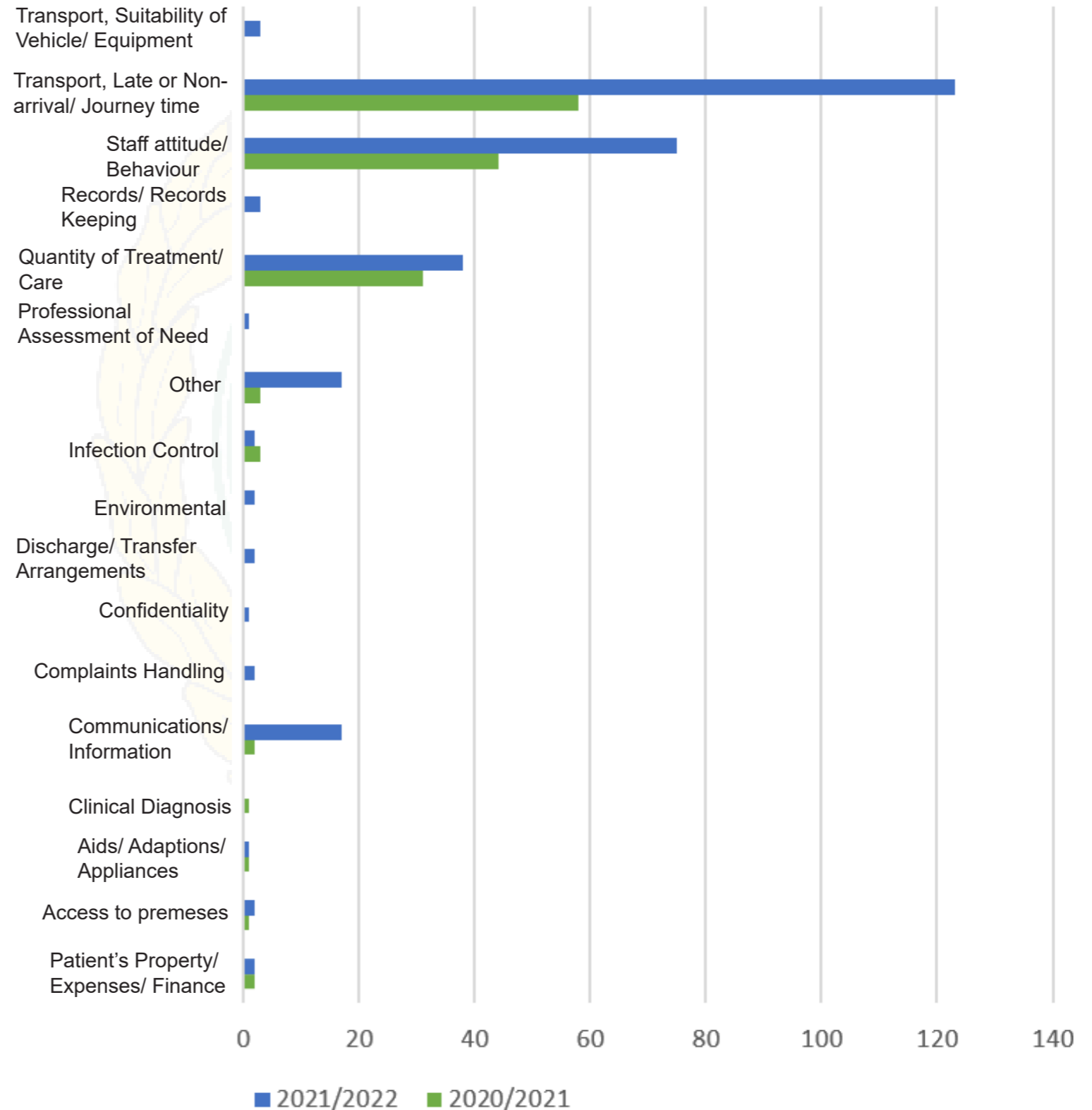
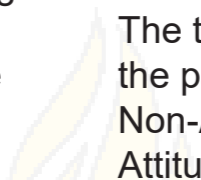
The data shows an increase of 107% in complaints relating to the delay in providing ambulance assistance, and an increase of 44% in complaints relating to staff attitude and behaviour. These increases could be attributed to a number of factors including increased staff absences as a result of COVID, delayed hospital handovers due to system wide pressures, compassion fatigue of our workforce who have worked tirelessly through the pandemic, and an increase in demand for our services. NIAS is working closely with the Department of Health to increase our available resources. We are also working with local Emergency Departments to try to ensure that our patients can be handed over to hospital clinical teams as quickly as possible so that ambulances are able to respond to further emergencies.

# What People Complained About

The chart below shows the number of subjects (areas of concern) raised within the complaints received during 2021/2022. The increase in number of subjects is attributable to both the increase in number of complaints received and also improvement processes for capturing the complexity

of cases where multiple concerns are raised within a single complaint.

The top three subjects of complaint in the past year were: Transport, Delay & Non-Arrival/Journey Time (36%), Staff Attitude/Behaviour (28%) and Quality of Treatment & Care (22%).

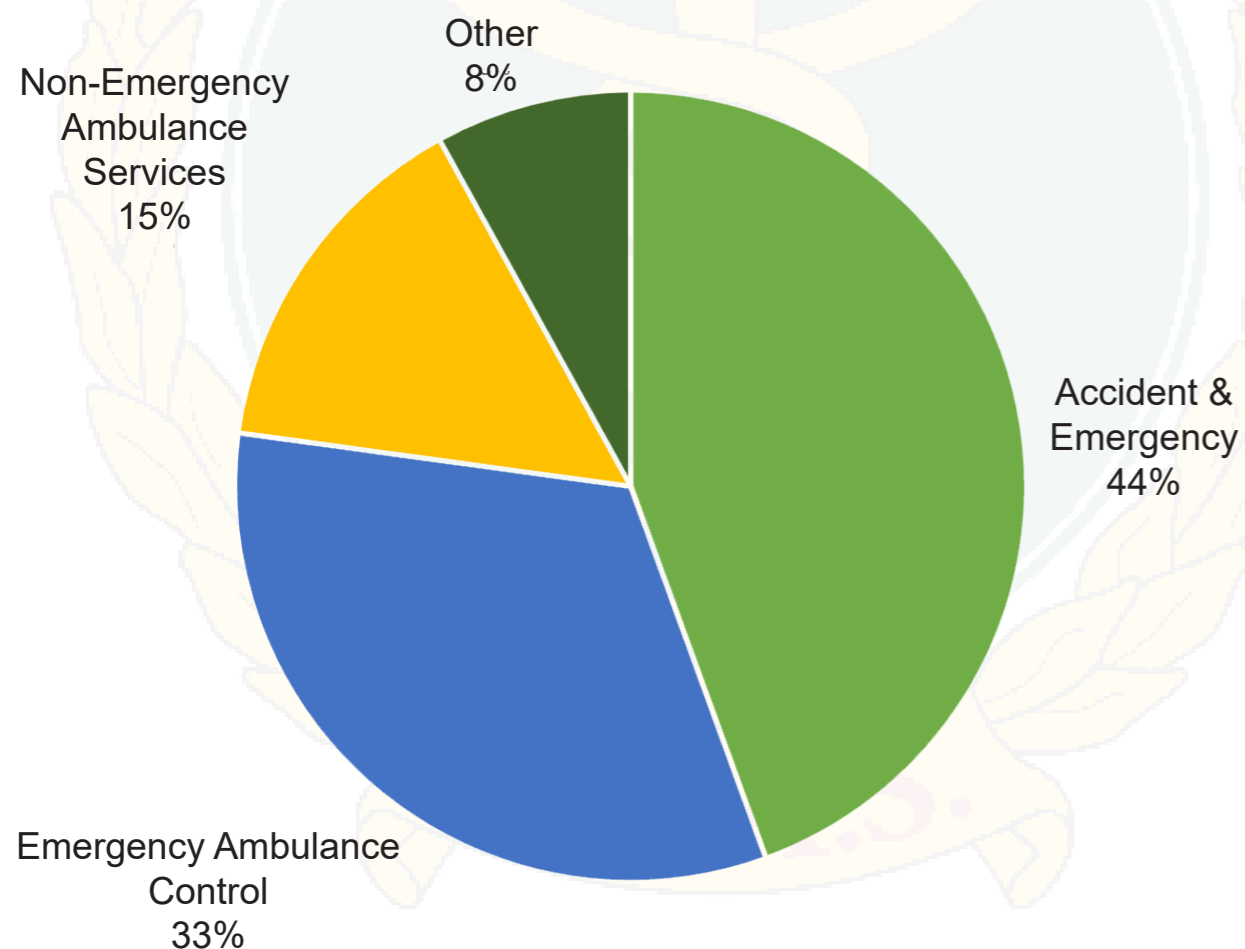


## Area of Complaints

This graph shows the breakdown by directorate of the complaints received for 2021/2022.

Of the 266 complaints received by the Trust, 44% (72) related to Accident and Emergency services. 33% (53) related to Emergency Ambulance Control services, such as call handling and call categorisation. 15% (24) related to non-emergency ambulance services, used to transport patients to appointments and transfers between hospitals. The remaining 8% (13) related to other speciality services within the Trust.

## Service Area of Complaints 2021/2022



## Timeliness of our Response to Complaints

97% of all complaints were acknowledged within the target of 2 working days. This is an increase of 10% on the 2020/2021 total.

The table below details the timeliness of our response to complainants, whose complaints were received during 2021/2022. As of 9 August 2022, 25 (9%) complaints received during 2021/2022 remained open.

Timeliness of Closed Complaints	Value
% of complaints closed within 20 working day target	17% (decrease of 3% on previous year)
% of complaints that took between 20 and 40 days to close	9%
% of complaints that took over 40 days to close	55%
<b>Timeliness of open cases</b>	
Average number of days cases open at 9 August 2022	187 working days
<b>Reopened Cases</b>	
% of closed cases reopened	2%

During 2021/2022, like our colleagues across Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, NIAS faced an unprecedented challenge in the form of the coronavirus pandemic and the system wide pressures this created. As a result of these resourcing challenges, during the period 2021/2022, NIAS spent seven months at our highest Resource Escalation Action Plan (REAP) level, Level 4 – Extreme Pressure. In order to enable staff to focus on improving the operational response other non-operational work may be suspended during extreme pressures, this has impacted the investigation of complaints, which has contributed to delays in complaints response.

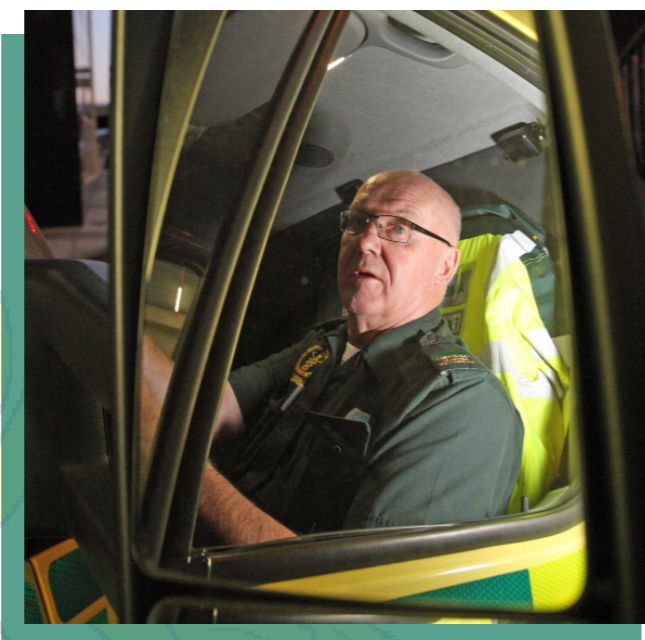
Whilst the number of complaints closed during 2021/2022 increased by 93% from the previous year (137 in 20/21 to 265 in 21/22) the percentage of these closed within 20 working days reduced by 3% to 17%. The challenges of investigating complaints during REAP 4 along with a backlog of complaints from the previous year, significantly impacted the timeliness of resolving these complaints.

The Trust is committed to improving the responsiveness of its complaint handling processes and will seek to improve the response times for complaints in the coming year. However, we recognise the importance of maintaining an emphasis on the quality of the responses and ensuring resolution for the complainants, relevant to the issues raised.

## If People are Dissatisfied

Sometimes people are not always happy with the outcome of the investigation into their complaint. We encourage people to let us know if they are unhappy, and we consider other options to attempt to resolve their concerns. We

routinely offer to meet complainants, as this allows the opportunity for more detailed discussions, face-to-face. We also advise complainants of the free confidential advice and advocacy support offered by the Patient Client Council.



## Ombudsman

For those people who remained dissatisfied, they had the option to approach the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (Ombudsman) directly. In 2021/2022, no complaints were

accepted by the Ombudsman for investigation. One other complaint, received by the Ombudsman prior to 1 April 2021 remains ongoing.



## Complaints Training

The Trust provides comprehensive complaints handling training to a wide variety of management staff in the form of both online e-learning and supportive practical training sessions. We currently employ 1543 staff within the Trust, all of whom are required to undertake mandatory training in Complaints Awareness every three years. To date, 76% of our staff have completed this course (662 staff in 19/20 & 396 staff in 20/21, & 119 in 21/22), all achieving a 100% pass rate.

The online course is an introduction to the issue of handling complaints and basic customer care. It is completed as part of a new staff member's induction process and as refresher training for existing staff on a 3-year rolling basis. More recently, the Trust have provided regular complaints awareness training for operational managers required to undertake complaint investigations that focuses on the practical 'how to' elements of the complaints procedure.



## Learning from Complaints

We welcome complaints so that we can learn lessons and improve our services. We use this information to feed back to patients and staff on the changes and improvements made.



Complaints are discussed with the staff concerned and often the issues are brought to Trust meetings for discussion as to how services can be improved. The learning from complaints (and compliments) is also shared at the Trust's quarterly Learning Outcomes Review Group. A number of improvements have been put in place over the year 2021/2022 following complaints. Here are some examples:

- Learning letter shared with our private ambulance providers in relation to the securing of equipment and completion of Patient Report Forms
- Clinical notice in relation to the management of patients who have ingested toxins.
- Provision of bottled water for service

users in ambulances.

- Clinical notice in relation to the actions to take when making the decision to not take a patient to hospital.
  - Establishment of a Falls Improvement Group related specifically to response times and is guided by the AACE Falls Governance Framework – July 2021.
  - Medicine Memo to advise crews what they should do in the extreme circumstances whereby a patient's medication needs to be removed for their own safety.
- All staff who have received staff attitude/behaviour complaints have undertaken reflective practices and where appropriate, received counselling and further training, in order to prevent any reoccurrence.

# Compliments

Whilst the Trust recognises that sometimes things go wrong, each year the Trust receives hundreds of letters of appreciation and expressions of thanks to acknowledge the excellent services provided.

We are proud of our staff and ensure that positive feedback is shared and celebrated. Our staff certainly appreciate feedback from their patients and clients, and knowing when

things go well.

In 2021/2022, the Trust received **375** compliments, which is a **74% increase** on the 216 received during 2020/2021. Some of this increase is attributable to the actions taken to improve the recording of compliments received across the Trust.

Here are some examples of the wonderful praise we have received.

I would like to sincerely thank the 2 ambulance men who came to my wife's rescue this morning. They were professional, personable and reassuring to my wife who was in great pain. Five stars to all concerned.

My family had to make a 999 call to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service as I was in a hypoglycaemic coma. I would like to express my sincere gratitude and thanks to the paramedic who arrived in an ambulance car very promptly. The care and professionalism which I received was very much appreciated by me and my family and thanks to him I have recovered.



I would like to thank the two paramedics who attended a young girl who was choking. Without the assistance of these paramedics I believe she would not have survived. They were calm, professional and extremely competent in a very challenging situation. When they called for assistance this was unavailable and a call was also being made to attend for CPR at another location. I cannot imagine having to deal with stress and pressure of this nature daily and offer my heartfelt gratitude and admiration to these paramedics.

I want to share a very positive experience with NIAS. I am sure you get a lot of negative feedback, so wanted to share something good! My wife is pregnant and has epilepsy. Today she had a 3-4 minute tonic clonic seizure. NIAS responded very quickly with a rapid response paramedic and an ambulance. The three guys were exemplary in how they acted; very friendly and calming. I could never ask for more!

I was in an RTC. An initial nasty experience made bearable by a very professional, skilled and caring crew. They were joined by another paramedic who assisted them and me in every way before going on to another call. I know a bit about how difficult their jobs are from my previous life. They deserve acknowledgement for what they do but so often its criticism in the press. Thanks very much for your help.

We are so thankful to the paramedics, who attended my husband, when he took a heart attack. They blue-lighted him to hospital where the team were waiting on him. We were told that if he hadn't been taken to hospital so quickly thanks to the rapid response and paramedics, the outcome would have been so different. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts to NIAS and the NHS who are so under pressure but did an amazing job in making sure my husband didn't die. He has now been discharged from hospital and is recuperating well at home.



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