

TITLE OF REPORT: Children and Families Service - Annual Report on Services
Complaints, Compliments and Representations - April 2018 to March 2019

REPORT OF: Caroline O'Neill, Strategic Director, Care, Wellbeing & Learning

Summary

Cabinet considered the attached report on 25 June 2019.

Cabinet approved the referral of the report to a meeting of the Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee in line with procedure.

It is a statutory requirement that the report is considered by a formal committee to ensure the Council has an effective complaints procedure that follows the legislation set out in The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006.

Background

1. The Health & Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003 requires that Councils with Social Services responsibilities produce an Annual Report of their Statutory Children's Services Complaints Procedure. This annual report sets out details of the complaints and representations made during the period April 2018 – March 2019.
2. Information contained in the report provides a summary of the statistical information together with a review of the effectiveness of the procedure. Some examples of service improvement are also included together with details of future objectives.

Annual Report Complaints and Representations

3. The report is consistent with the Sustainable Community Strategy – Vision 2030 and the Council's Corporate Plan. The report supports the Corporate Priority for serving our customers by continuously improving services and targeting areas of under achievement.
4. The Annual Report is specifically about Children Act 1989 Statutory Complaints for Children's Social Care Services, with information on complaint related queries and compliments that are received about staff or services. The report covers the period from 1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019.

Operation of the Procedure

5. The procedure has three stages:

- **Stage 1 Local Resolution** – response within 10 working days. The timescale can be extended to 20 working days if the complainant agrees to this extension.
- **Stage 2 Investigation** – formal response within 25 calendar days. Extensions to this must be negotiated with the complainant. Maximum is 65 working days.
- **Stage 3 Independent Review** – Panel consisting of Independent Chair and Independent Panel members who consider the complaint. Full response by Director of Social Services within 20 working days.

Statistical Analysis

6. In 2018/19 the number of complaints and representations dealt with was as follows:

- 40 statutory complaints were dealt with at Stage 1;
- This is a 18% decrease on complaints received during 2017/18, (49);
- The number of statutory complaints, (40), represents 43% of all dissatisfaction received about Children's Services during 2018/19, (92);
- 60% (24) of complaints were about quality of services provided;
- From this, 54% (13) were regarding the quality of social work support received;
- 20% (8) complaints were in respect of the actions or conduct of individual workers of which 21% (5) were partly upheld after investigation;
- 3 complaints progressed to Stage 2 of the complaint's procedure;
- This is a 50% increase on the number of Stage 2 complaints received during 2017/18, (2);
- 1 Stage 3 Independent Review Panel was held during 2018/19;
- The number of complaint related queries (low level issues not requiring a written response), received increased by 9% (38) compared to the number received during 2017/18 (35).

Points of Interest

7. The following key points may be of interest:

- 50% (20) of all complaints received were regarding services provided by the Looked After Children Service;
- 25% (10) of all complaints received were in respect of services provided by the Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams;
- The majority of children receiving a service are allocated a social worker from the Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams and as such, dissatisfaction is common;
- However, complaints about the Safeguarding & Care Planning Teams reduced by almost 57% compared with the number received during 2017/18, (23);
- 12% (5) of complaints were regarding the services provided by the Referral and Assessment Team. This is a 58% decrease on the number of complaints received during 2017/18, (12);
- During 2018/19 there were 262 children on a Child Protection Plan and 1555 children receiving a statutory service. This means that from the number of families involved with Children's Services, only 2% of contacts resulted in a formal complaint;
- 6 complaints were received direct from young people and 5 complaints were from advocates acting on the child / young person's behalf;
- Therefore, 28% (11) of complaints were referred by either Looked after Children, or by an advocate acting on the child / young person's instructions;
- In 2018/19, 45% (18) of complaints were not upheld after investigation;

- The number of complaints found to be unjustified evidences that the workers involved had acted appropriately and in line with guidance and procedures;
- Between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019, Children's Services received 73 compliments about either individual workers or teams;
- This means that during 2018/19, 44% of all representations about Children Services were compliments.

Learning from complaints and representations:

8. Learning from complaints is critical to prevent recurrence of the cause(s) of the original complaint. It is important that we make sure that people's experiences help us to improve services where we can. Changes can include policy, procedure or employee development.

Examples of Service Improvements identified during 2018/19:

- Business Support Officers have been reminded that they should always check with the social work teams before advising callers on the availability of staff and promising immediate call backs. This will ensure that callers can then be aware of when they may expect the service to contact them.
- All Social Workers responsible for carrying out assessments have been reminded that they should always confirm the child / young person's registered details with partner agencies such as education and health. This will ensure that children / young people whose care transfers to another family member, will continue to have their health and educational needs met.
- In the event an allocated social worker is on annual leave, any significant information that is raised during this time is now shared as soon as the allocated worker returns to work. If the information is felt to urgent, it is passed to a manager within the service, who will consider whether any further action is necessary.
- When changes to children's records are identified, individual workers have been instructed to complete the updates at their earliest opportunity. This will then ensure that the case records reflect the current information in respect of the child / young person's care management.
- Due to a lack of communication in relation to contact sessions, workers have been instructed to ensure contact is made with family members as soon as they are aware that the contact session is to be postponed. Workers should, where possible, ensure that they share this information with family members by either text or in writing.
- Where no or very late contact has been made, the Service will reimburse any travel expenses incurred by the family along with arranging an additional contact session at a mutually convenient time.
- When social workers are concerned that family disputes may be impacting on the child / young person's stability and emotional wellbeing, they must always explore independent mediation to support the family in resolving their issues.
- As there has recently been a lack of clarity about the parameters of Pathway Plans and Staying Put Agreements, the Looked after Children Team have attended a briefing session in respect of the legislation and policy that guide these processes. This will ensure that all workers understand that Pathway Plans and Staying Put Agreements cease when a young person reaches 21.

Future Objectives

9. Objectives for 2019/20 are to:
- a. Continue to meet regularly with Senior Managers from Children's Services to consider what further action needs to be taken to;
 - i. Resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity;
 - ii. Improve the number of complaints being investigated and resolved within statutory timescales;
 - iii. Ensure that the number of complaints progressing to Stage 2 and 3 remain low;
 - b. To assist the Children's Rights Officer in contacting all children who are currently being looked after by Gateshead Council, to gain their views and comments on the services they receive. All responses will be evaluated and appropriate action will be taken to resolve any concerns or queries. These views will also contribute to future service planning and delivery within Care, Wellbeing & Learning;
 - c. Ensure that staff members who receive compliments continue to pass the details on to Social Care Customer Services so that they or their team receive the recognition they deserve.

Recommendation

10. Committee is requested to:
- I. Consider and comment on the annual report;
 - II. Indicate whether it is satisfied with the performance of Care, Wellbeing and Learning in responding to complaints and ensuring that this results in continuous service improvement.