

8 September 2022

TITLE OF REPORT: Children and Families Service - Annual Report on Services
Complaints, Compliments and Representations - April 2021 to March
2022

REPORT OF: Andrea Houlahan, Deputy Strategic Director, Children's Social Care,
and Lifelong Learning.

Summary

Cabinet considered the attached report on 21 June 2022.

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 2021 – March 2022.
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 about 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 2021 – 31 March 2022.

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 Assistant Strategic Director of Social Services within 20 working days.

Statistical Analysis

6. In 2021/22 the number of complaints and representations dealt with was as follows:
- The number of formal contacts received, including compliments, about Children's Services decreased by 13.2% (187) compared with the number of contacts received during 2020/21, (215).
 - The number of contacts raising dissatisfaction increased by 11% (79 to 88).
 - This is the same level of dissatisfaction received during 2019/20.
 - Children's Services received 11 Stage 1 complaints during 2021/22. This is almost a 35% decrease on Stage 1 complaints received during 2020/21, (17).
 - The number of complaint related queries (low level issues not requiring a written response) increased by 3% compared to those received during 2020/21 (26 from 27).
 - 59% (16) of complaint related queries were regarding the quality of services provided.
 - All complaint related queries received about Children's Social Care were dealt with directly by either the team manager of the service complained about or by the Complaints Section after prior discussion with the worker concerned.
 - There were no complaints registered at Stage 2 of the complaint's procedure during 2021/22.
 - However, there were three Stage 3 Review Panels held during this time.
 - Two of the Panels held were in respect of the same complaint. The first Panel was stood down due to new information submitted by the Service.
 - During 2021/22, 53% (99) of all Children's Services contacts were compliments.

Points of Interest

7. The following key points may be of interest:
- Complaints brought by relatives of children receiving a service accounted for 91% (10) of all complaint referrals.
 - One complaint was raised directly by a cared for young person. This complaint was regarding the actions of staff in a commissioned residential facility. This complaint was partially upheld after investigation.
 - Children and young people receiving a service have recourse to the Council's Children's Rights Officer. The Children's Rights Officer works closely with those who raise concerns and, in most cases, can resolve these successfully.
 - 36% (4) of all complaints received were in respect of services provided by the Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams. However, it should be noted that most children receiving a service are allocated a social worker from the Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams.
 - 27% (3) of complaints were regarding the services provided by the Assessment and Intervention Team.
 - The key theme identified from complaints about the Assessment and Intervention Service were disputes to information within assessments or the assessment process.

- 27% (3) of complaints received were regarding services provided by the Cared For Children Team. This is at the same level as the number of complaints received about the team in 2020/21, (3).

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 2021/22

- As a result of a Statutory complaint, where it was alleged that the social worker failed to recognise a child's religious and cultural upbringing, it was arranged that specific training in respect of religious awareness for social workers will be included in the portfolio option for staff and will be a regular occurrence.
- It was also recommended that all staff across Children's Services are mindful of any cultural and religious differences across the communities in Gateshead and that these are considered during social work involvement with BAME families. This issue was also addressed by the Local Authority carrying out mandatory Equality and Diversity for all Local Authority staff.
- After a Data complaint about the presentation of personal records following a Subject Access Request, (SAR), the Service responsible for administering the requests carried out a review of the process. All current applications were subsequently reviewed to ensure that they were being dealt with efficiently and appropriately. In addition to this SAR Officers are now able to dedicate sufficient time to deal with each request in line with service requirements.
- Following a complaint where the parent of a child receiving a service complained about the lack of support during the Covid19 lockdown period, it was found that the family's self isolation period along with sickness within the Social Work Team did slightly impact on support provided. An apology was given at the time and was also reiterated within the response letter. The complainant was satisfied with the service support following the ceasing of the Covid-19 restrictions.
- After a LG&SCO investigation into a complaint about the removal of a cared for child from the foster placement along with concerns about the quality of the LADO process the Ombudsman did identify recommendations which were shared with the Council. The Council accepted the recommendations and implemented the changes required.
- After a complaint about delays in receiving Child Protection Review Reports, the worker was instructed to ensure all future reports are shared in line with timescales. This will then provide an opportunity to consider the content of the reports and to allow the family member to raise any concerns or queries before the Review Conference takes place.

Future Objectives

9. Objectives for 2022/23 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.
 - iv. That any identified improvements to services are implemented where appropriate and monitored to ensure compliance by teams across Children's Services.
- b. 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 Children's Services in responding to complaints and ensuring that this results in continuous service improvement.

Contact: Alison Routledge, Ext: 2408