

**TITLE:** **Children and Families Service - Annual Report on Compliments, Comments and Complaints - April 2023 to March 2024**

**REPORT OF:** Alison Routledge, Social Care Complaints Manager

**SERVICE:** Quality Assurance and Commissioning, Integrated Adults and Social Care Services

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## SUMMARY

The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 sets out the procedure that Local Authorities have a responsibility to follow when a complaint is made about Children's Social Services. Regulation 13 (3) of this Act states that all local authorities must publish an Annual Report (1 April to 31 March) to identify the number, detail and outcomes to all complaints received. The information within this Annual Report fulfils Gateshead Council's obligations under this regulation and covers the period between 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024.

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### 1.0 The Statutory Complaints Procedure

- 1.1 This procedure is for all representations received from children and young people, their parents, foster carers, or other qualifying adults about Gateshead Council's Children's Services.
- 1.2 The Statutory Procedure covers complaints about services delivered to children and young people under Part 3 of the 1989 Act and specific functions under Parts 4 and 5 of the Act.
- 1.3 There are three stages to the procedure:

#### Stage 1 - Local Resolution

Operational managers investigate Stage 1 complaints. Complaints at this level are expected to be concluded within ten working days, with an extension of further ten working days, (with the agreement of the complainant), if necessary. The maximum time for a Stage 1 investigation is twenty working days.

#### Stage 2 – Investigation

Investigations at Stage 2 are conducted at arm's length to the operational service complained about, with full and formal reporting to the complainant by an Adjudicating Officer, (usually at Service Director level), within twenty-five working days, with extension up to sixty-five working days, if necessary, which must be negotiated with the complainant.

#### Stage 3 – Review Panel

If there is any residual dissatisfaction with the outcome at Stage 2, the complainant can request that the issues are taken to a Review Panel, (Stage 3). A Stage 3 Review Panel must be requested within twenty working days of receipt of the Stage 2 investigation findings. A Stage 3 Review Panel is the final stage of the statutory complaint's procedure.

## **2.0 Publicity and Information**

- 2.1 Information about the complaint's procedure can be made available in key languages and formats. Requests for information in these formats or from customers with sight or hearing impairment are provided via the Council's Communication Team.
- 2.2 There is also a leaflet for children and young people receiving a service. This leaflet was designed with help from the children and young people from One Voice, the Children and the Young People's Forum. The leaflet includes a pre-paid slip that can be completed and posted back free of charge.
- 2.3 When young people are admitted into Local Authority care, part of the 20-day review requirements state that they are to be visited by the Council's Children's Rights Officer. The young person also receives a 'Welcome' pack', which includes information, leaflets and other guidance on how to make a complaint.
- 2.4 The Children's Rights Officer, Independent Visitors and Independent Reviewing Officers are important links between the child and the Complaints Manager and ensure that any issues of dissatisfaction are resolved at the earliest opportunity.

## **3.0 The Independent Element**

- 3.1 Under the complaint's procedure, there is a requirement to provide Independent Persons for all Stage 2 complaints. There is currently a reciprocal consortium arrangement with South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council and Sunderland City Council, which provides Independent People for Children Act 1989 complaints. There is also a requirement to ensure that Stage 3 Review Panels consist of three members who are fully independent of the Council. Review Panels are independently organised and administered by Legal and Democratic Services.

## **4.0 Advocacy and Special Needs**

- 4.1 The purpose of advocacy in complaints procedures is to ensure that children and young people are given assistance when making or intending to make a complaint. Advocacy is about empowering children and young people to make sure that their rights are respected and that their views and wishes are fully considered and reflected in decision-making about their own lives. It is a legal requirement that any child or young person wishing to make a complaint must always be offered the services of an advocate.

## **5.0 Training and Employee Development**

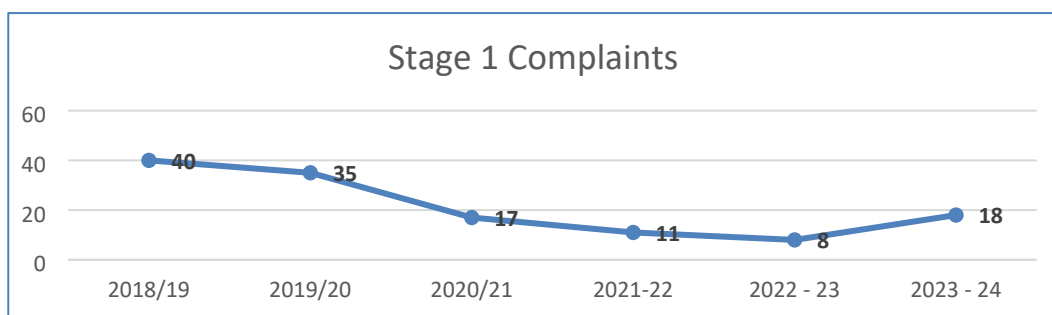
- 5.1 Training for Investigating Officers is undertaken on an annual basis. All investigating skills training courses are commissioned from the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman, (LG&SCO). This ensures that investigating officers are trained to the Ombudsman's investigation standard with the focus being on swift resolution, proportionate investigations, and appropriate redress.
- 5.2 An LG&SCO Investigating Skills Training Course was arranged for April 2023. All current and new managers across Children's Services operational teams are invited to attend. The Council also undertake additional training and guidance on the internal complaints procedure followed by Gateshead Council with all Children's Services managers. This additional training reinforces the requirement to carry out robust investigations across all stages of the procedure along with the importance of meeting statutory timescales.

## **6.0 Complaints from Children in Residential Facilities**

- 6.1 All children's residential homes have their own "in-house" complaints process to resolve low level concerns. Residential staff work with the young person and allow them to identify themselves how their issues can be resolved to their satisfaction. Information about low level concerns is retained within the facility and is available in the event of OFSTED inspections.

## 7.0 All Representations Received over the Past Three Years

Representations	2021/2022	2022/2023	2023/2024
Stage 1 Complaints	11	8	18
Stage 2 Complaints	0	4	0
Stage 3 - Review Panels	3	3	0
Comments	3	1	0
Corporate Complaints	19	10	10
Complaint related queries	26	23	39
Data Issues	15	8	4
Safeguarding Partnership Complaints	0	2	1
Insurance Claims	5	1	2
LGO Referrals	6	8	5
MP Enquiry	0	4	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>Compliments</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>All Representations Received</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>Trend</b>	<b>-13.02%</b>	<b>5.35%</b>	<b>14.21%</b>



## 7.1 Key Points of Interest

- The number of formal contacts received citing dissatisfaction about Children's Services increased by 11% (80) compared with the number of dissatisfaction contacts received during 2022/23, (72).
- However, compared with all dissatisfaction during 2023/24, (80), 64% (145) of all Children's Services contacts were compliments.
- Compared with both corporate and statutory complaints, compliments accounted for 84% (145) of referrals.
- Children's Services received 18 Stage 1 complaints during 2023/24. This is a 125% increase on Stage 1 complaints received during 2022/23, (8).
- There was no overall reason for the increase in complaints. However, this number is more in line with the number of complaints received over previous years.
- 44% (8) of complaints related to the quality of services provided.
- Only one statutory complaint was received regarding the attitude or conduct of workers. After a full investigation, this complaint was found to be unjustified.
- 56% (10) of complaints were regarding the support provided by individual workers or services. This includes areas about financial support for SGO holders.
- The number of complaint related queries (low-level issues not requiring a written response) increased by 70% compared to those received during 2022/23 (39 from 23).
- 38% (15) of complaint related queries received were about the Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams. Issues included allegations of bias towards a particular parent, families unhappy with information within assessments or other reports, some of which were filed in court. Some low level issues were around the communication from individual members of staff.

- All complaint related queries received about Children’s Social Care were resolved informally by either the team manager of the service complained about or by the Complaints Section after prior discussion with the manager concerned.
- In all cases, the complainant can escalate their issue to a formal complaint. However, only one low level issue moved to a formal complaint and was about financial support following a SGO order.
- There were no complaints registered at Stage 2 of the complaint’s procedure during 2023/24. Stage 2 is the progression from a Stage 1 complaint. The issues remain the same but require a more in depth investigation with oversight by an Independent Person.
- There were also no Stage 3 Review Panels held during this time.

## 7.2 Specific Areas of Statutory Complaints

Service Area	2021 2022		2022 2023		2023 2024	
Children in Our Care	27.27%	3	37.50%	3	29.41%	5
Children with Disabilities	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	35.29%	6
Integrated Referral Team	27.27%	3	37.50%	3	17.65%	3
Safeguarding, Care Planning	36.36%	4	25.00%	2	17.65%	3
Safeguarding Children Unit	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	29.41%	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>11</b>		<b>8</b>		<b>18</b>

- 18% (3) of all statutory complaints received were in respect of services provided by the Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams. This is an increase of one complaint compared with the number that were received in 2022/23.
- It should be noted that most children receiving a service are allocated a social worker from the Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams.
- 18% (3) of complaints were regarding the services provided by the Integrated Referral Team.
- There was no key theme identified from complaints about the Integrated Referral Team, issues ranged from disputes about information within reports or assessments, the quality of support offered to families, disputes to information within assessments or about issues around social workers not enforcing directions of the courts. From the two complaints responded to, one was closed due to the issues relating to a Court decision and one was partially upheld.
- 29% (5) of complaints received were regarding services provided by the Children in our Care Teams. This is a 67% increase on the number received during 2022/23 (3).
- Three complaints about the Cared for Children Team were about quality of service, including staff support or about issues around SGO payments.
- After investigation, four complaints were partially upheld, and one complaint was fully upheld. All recommendations and improvements from the complaints are detailed within this report.

## 7.3 Issues linked to the complaint.

Main Complaint Issues	2021 2022		2022 2023		2023 2024	
Delay	0.00%	0	12.50%	1	0.00%	0
Lack of Service	18.18%	2	25.00%	2	44.44%	8
Quality of Service	54.55%	6	62.50%	5	44.44%	8
Refusal of Service	18.18%	2	0.00%	0	5.56%	1
Staff Issues	9.09%	1	0.00%	0	5.56%	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>11</b>		<b>8</b>		<b>18</b>

- There was only one complaint at Stage 1 regarding allegations of inappropriate staff conduct. This complaint was about the alleged actions of the worker, in particular about the refusal by the social worker to return the case to court. The complaint was fully investigated and found to be unjustified.
- In all cases, should complaints be received where there is evidence that workers have acted inappropriately or failed to follow processes or procedures, the matter is always

shared with senior managers and addressed directly with the member of staff concerned. Appropriate and proportionate measures are then taken to reduce the risk of any similar situations occurring.

- Quality of Service remained the key theme of all complaints received. 44% (8) of complaints received were regarding the quality of the services provided.
- Quality of service includes:
  - Missed or late social work visits.
  - Contact visits that are cancelled at very short notice.
  - Conflicting or incorrect information by workers.
  - Allegations of poor support from the services involved in individual cases.
  - Poor communication between the workers and family members.
- After investigation, only one complaint about quality of service was fully justified. Five were partially justified. Two complaints were closed as one had been informally resolved and one was in relation to a court decision.

## **7.4 Themes of Statutory Complaints Received**

After full consideration of all Stage 1 complaints received during 2023/24, only one key theme of dissatisfaction was identified.

### **7.4.1 Quality or lack of support from individuals or the Service**

During 2023/24, 56% (10) complaints were received about support from individuals or the overall service to families of children receiving a service. Two of these complaints included issues around communication and the lack of action from the workers involved in a child / children's case.

One complainant alleged that their child was placed on a child protection plan as the social worker hadn't taken allegations about a parent seriously enough to act against them until the situation was felt to warrant escalation. This complaint was partially upheld after investigation. However, the main issues about failure to act were not upheld.

One complaint about the quality of support from a worker or service was about a cared for young person. The issues relate to services provided to parents rather than the young person. The complaint raised issues about the quality of the communication, the lack of sharing of relevant information about the young person and disputed actions in relation to case management. This complaint was partially upheld, and recommendations identified. However, it has since moved to Stage 2 of the procedure.

One complaint related to alleged misinformation by the social worker which led to allegations of bias against the children's father. The complaint was partially upheld as there were found to be missed opportunities for effective communication. However, the elements of complaints about bias were not upheld.

One complaint was about misinformation given by the social worker in relation to financial support after a Special Guardianship order was granted. The complainant disputed the outcome after a financial review as they felt that the removal of support would cause significant hardship to the child concerned. The complaint was partially upheld as all information had been considered. However, it was felt that communication could have been improved upon and as such, it was agreed that the financial support should be reinstated and that in future it will be subject to regular reviews in line with the funding process and that any decisions will be immediately communicated to the care giver.

One complaint was regarding issues about the commissioning of an appropriate service for a disabled young person. It was found once the service was commissioned, which included elements of personal care, that the provider was not CQC registered. This raised issues about the communication and decisions taken by the service to allow the provider to take on the care package at the time. This complaint was upheld after investigation and recommendations for both Children's Services and Commissioning identified.

Other complaints included issues about cancelled appointments at short notice and the lack of regular updates on children's cases to relevant family members.

After investigation, 63% (5) complaints were found to be partially upheld, 13% (1) was fully upheld and 25% (2) were closed. One was informally resolved, and one was closed due to no response to contact. Three complaints remain outstanding.

After consideration of these concerns, it continues to be an issue that families of children receiving a service may misinterpret the reasons for assessments that are undertaken and often feel that assessment outcome is biased in favour of either parent. All social workers are trained to undertake objective assessments and to reflect the family situation to the best of their professional judgement given the information and allegations presented by both parties and it is unfortunate that this does sometimes cause allegations of bias against the worker or service.

## 7.5 Statutory Complaints Outcomes

Outcomes of complaints	2021 2022		2022 2023		2023 2024	
Outstanding			2		3	
Not upheld	45%	5	50.00%	3	6.67%	1
Partially upheld	27%	3	16.67%	1	46.67%	7
Upheld	0.00%	0	33.33%	2	13.33%	2
Informal Resolution	27%	3	0.00%	0	26.67%	4
Closed or Withdrawn	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	6.67%	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>11</b>		<b>8</b>		<b>18</b>

- In 2023/24, 47% (7) of complaints were partially upheld after investigation.
- 47% (7) complaints were partially justified. Partially justified highlights that the main issue of complaint was found to be unjustified, but there were areas where the service could have performed better, for example communication, delays in returning calls or late/missed visits.
- After investigation, only one complaint was found to be fully justified.
- 27% (4) of complaints were informally resolved after intervention from the services concerned. In all cases the complainant was satisfied that their complaint had been successfully resolved.
- In each case where it is found that there had been some fault by the service, the complainant will always receive a written apology within their response letter. The Investigating Officer will also be expected to identify ways in which the service can improve and ensure that these recommendations are progressed by the service.

## 7.6 Timescales for Responding to Statutory Complaints

Complaints Completed within 20 Working Days	2021 2022	2022 2023	2023 2024
Resolved	4	1	5
Not Resolved	2	5	13

- The statutory timescale for Stage 1 resolution is ten working days. This can be extended to twenty working days with the complainant's agreement.
- From the 15 complaints responded to, only five were completed within twenty working days.
- This evidences that only 28% (5) of complaints met the extended timescale of twenty working days.
- As several complaints now include additional areas or complex issues, it is difficult to meet such tight timescales for resolution, whilst also ensuring a thorough and robust response. However, the Investigating Officers is expected to maintain contact with the complainant to keep them updated on the progress of investigation.
- Prompts for investigation updates are sent on a weekly basis by the Complaints Team to all investigating officers, (and their line managers) undertaking investigations to request updates on the progress of investigation. If the complaint is overdue, the Practice Lead

is then informed and will be requested to make arrangements for the complaint to be finalised and completed.

## 8.0 Stage 2 and 3 Complaints

Stage 2 Complaints	2021 2022	2022 2023	2023 2024
	0	4	0
Stage 3 Review Panels Held	3	3	0

- There were no Stage 2 requests during 2023/24. There were also no Stage 3 Review Panels held during this period.

## 9.0 How Statutory Complaints Were Received

Method of Complaint	2021 2022		2022 2023		2023 2024	
Complaint Form – Online	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0
E - mail	54.55%	6	100.00%	8	83.33%	15
Children’s Complaints Leaflet	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0
In Person	9.09%	1	0.00%	0	0.00%	0
Letter	9.09%	1	0.00%	0	5.56%	1
Telephone	27.27%	3	0.00%	0	11.11%	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>11</b>		<b>8</b>		<b>18</b>

- Email continues to be the main method of complaint referral accounting for 83% (15) of all statutory complaints received. Email also accounted for four corporate complaints received.
- Emails and letters tend to raise multiple areas of complaint. Therefore, it is important that an Investigating Officer speaks with the complainant at the earliest opportunity to identify the key issues of concern and to highlight areas that are not able to be responded to or are outside of the remit of the complaint’s procedure.
- Statutory complaints brought by relatives with parental responsibility accounted for 78% (14) of all complaint referrals.
- One statutory complaint was raised by a child in our care via their advocate. The complaint was about placement issues and a disputed move to another placement. The complaint was investigated, and plans put in place to include regular reviews of the current placement.
- Children and young people receiving a service have recourse to the Council’s Children’s Rights Officer. The Children’s Rights Officer and Independent Reviewing Officers empower children and young people to use the complaints procedure when necessary. However, both the Children’s Right Officer and the Independent Reviewing Officer are often able to resolve issues successfully.

## 10.0 Equalities Monitoring

- Gateshead Council recognises that equality monitoring of service delivery is crucial for effective planning and scrutiny of the services that it provides. This monitoring can identify which groups are using services and gauge their level of satisfaction. The information can then be used to highlight possible inequalities, investigate their underlying causes, and address any unfairness or disadvantage. However, as complainants tend to be from relatives, it is not possible to collect this information with any accuracy as diversity forms sent out were not routinely returned despite the forms being made simpler to complete in 2022/23.
- During 2023/24, there was one complaint and two low level issues where the complainant was a member of the BAME community. Two compliments were also received.
- Information about the complaints process can be made available in key languages and formats. Information for customers with sight, hearing or learning difficulties can also be provided.



## 11.0 Corporate Complaints Received

Between 2023/2024, Children's Services received ten Corporate Complaints. Corporate Complaints are from those who do not have parental responsibility, or issues relating to Child Protection matters, LADO issues and Targeted Support / Specialist Support. Corporate Complaints are outside of the statutory procedure and follow the Council's Corporate Complaint Procedure.

Corporate Complaint - Service Area	2021 – 2022	2022 – 2023	2023 – 2024
Integrated Referral Team	6	2	0
Children in our Care	3	1	0
CWD	0	0	1
Early Help / Specialist Support	3	2	2
Safeguarding & Care Planning	1	3	5
Safeguarding Children Unit	6	2	0
SAR Team	0	0	1
Travel Care Team	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>

Corporate Complaint - Main Element	2021 – 2022	2022 – 2023	2023 – 2024
Delay	0	0	1
Lack of Service	1	3	2
Quality of Service	11	4	5
Refusal	5	0	0
Staff Conduct / Actions	2	3	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>

Corporate Complaints - Outcome	2021 – 2022	2022 – 2023	2023 – 2024
Not Upheld	17	8	5
Partially Upheld	1	0	2
Fully Upheld	1	1	0
Withdrawn / Closed	0	1	3
<b>Total Completed</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>

Five complaints responded to via the Corporate Complaint Procedure were about quality of service. Three of these complaints were regarding disputes to decisions made, which included disputes over the closing of a case by Targeted Family Support. The family had felt that the service should continue up until the young person's eighteenth birthday. However, it was found that support would only be provided should a need continue to be identified. The complaint was not upheld. One complaint was regarding a dispute to court action when their grandchild was removed from their placement with a family friend. Again, this complaint was not upheld as decisions had been taken in line with legal obligations.

Other issue relates to disputes about contact arrangements with extended family members or about communication by workers or the service.

One corporate complaint was about services provided by the Travel Care Team when a taxi had failed to turn up to take a disabled child to school. It was identified that there had been a breakdown in communication with the provider and as such the complaint was upheld. Several recommendations to prevent this situation from occurring again were then implemented.

After investigation, five corporate complaints were not upheld, two were partially upheld and three were either informally resolved or withdrawn.



## 12.0 Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman Referrals

During 2023/24, Children's Services received five Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LG&SCO) referrals.

LG&SCO Referrals - Service Area	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024
Children in our Care	2	2	0
Children with Disabilities	1	1	0
Integrated Referral Team	0	0	1
Safeguarding & Care Planning	3	4	2
Safeguarding Children Unit / LADO	0	1	1
Targeted Family Support	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>

LG&SCO Outcomes	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024
Closed - No Further Action	3	3	5
Closed - LA Remedy Appropriate	1	2	0
Outside LG&SCO Jurisdiction	1	1	0
Closed – Out of Time (12 months)	0	1	0
Fault Causing Injustice	1	1	0
	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>

In all cases, information was provided by the Council to allow the Ombudsman to consider the issues raised. Following this, all five referrals were subsequently closed by the Ombudsman after initial enquiries.

## 13.0 Learning from Complaints

- 13.1 At the end of every investigation, the investigating officer is responsible for identifying any improvements or recommendations resulting from the complaint. Changes can include policy, procedure, or staff development.
- 13.2 Complaints about individual practice or failure to follow procedures are dealt with by reinforcement of processes and reiterating customer care standards through service / team meetings or individual supervision sessions. In addition to this, if it is felt that additional or refresher training is required for either workers or teams, this will be progressed by the relevant team manager.
- 13.3 In respect of complaints about staff attitude or conduct, if it is found that an employee has deliberately acted inappropriately, the issue will be dealt with in line with internal employment procedures.
- 13.4 Children's Services have recently developed a Quality Assurance process via the Quality Assurance Strategic Group which allows the Services to consider recommendations and improvements identified from all complaints that have been responded to. The process monitors any agreed recommendations to ensure that they are implemented within a timely manner, and to ensure that learning from complaints is shared across all Children's Services Teams.
- 13.5 **Improvements to service identified following a complaint:**

One Stage 2 complaint was also responded to during 1 July and 30 September 2023. This complaint related to several areas within Children's Services.

**Action:** A Stage 2 complaint was received about several areas in respect of Children's Services involvement with the family. Overall, the complainant felt that due to the actions of

the workers involved, he had been prevented from having the children in his care and, that due to actions and bias by the workers, he had been prevented from having contact. Issues raised were regarding alleged parental alienation, bias, not checking specific court orders, which had been used by the mother to reinforce her decisions about contact.

The complaint had several issues. Although, it would be standard practice to theme the areas complained about, due to the needs of the complainant, it was felt that each area raised should be responded to separately to evidence that every area of complaint had been considered and responded to. Some areas of the complaint were upheld. However, most of the issues raised were found to be unjustified or unsubstantiated.

#### **Improvements:**

- That when a parent claims that there is a court order in place that prevents contact between children and an absent parent, social workers should verify this statement and, where necessary, check the document for themselves. Following this an email was sent to all staff to inform of this requirement. This instruction has since been disseminated to all Children's Services staff.
- That training should be provided on non-molestation orders should be provided for all Children's Services staff to ensure that they fully understand what this type of order covers and what restrictions may apply. This requirement has since been added to the Court Skills Training and is now delivered via an e learning module.
- As the investigation evidenced that staff interviewed did not have the required knowledge of parental alienation, training on parental alienation is now be provided for Children's Services staff to assist them in supporting parents where this is a potential issue. This has also been added to the Court Skills Training and is delivered via an e learning module.
- That all managers and Social Work Staff should ensure that details of any meetings, which often include parents/family members, are clearly recorded on Mosaic. The record should always include relevant information regarding why the meeting was held and should note any decisions that were made. An email was shared with Practice Leads with a request that this information is disseminated to all social work staff, to ensure that this takes place in future.

#### **Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams**

**Action:** A complaint received where it was alleged that all those with PR had not been enabled to have their voices heard during the assessment process. It was also identified that only one parent had received copies of relevant documentation, including Safety Plans which evidenced that they had not been sent to all those with PR. An additional concern within the complaint identified that there had been communication issues between the service and the complainant.

#### **Improvements:**

Instructions were shared with all Practice Leads with a request that the following was disseminated amongst their team members:

- That all workers within Children's Social Care must share a copy of the safety plan, or other assessments undertaken with all those who have PR. This will ensure that parents and others with PR are informed about any work or decisions that are ongoing.
- Also, in cases where the worker is required to liaise with those with PR, it is important that they do attempt to contact them by the most convenient means, generally this will be by telephone, but if they are unable to make contact, alternative means such as email or text must be considered.

**Action:** A complaint was investigated where it was found that a significant email from a family member had not been placed on the case file. The information within the email was in respect of a potential risk to a young child. As the email had not been recorded on the case record it was unclear whether any action had been taken following receipt of the information.

**Improvement:** Practice Leads instructed their team managers to share within their own teams that all social workers must always ensure that any significant emails from parents or carers along with any service response to the information provided are placed on the child / children's case file at the earliest opportunity.

### **Children in our Care**

**Action:** A complaint arose following a significant medical emergency in relation to a cared for young person. It was found that information about the incident, along with advice about the hospital / ward that the young person had been admitted to, was not shared in a timely manner with his mum. Although there were circumstances that impacted on mum being informed of this, the service did admit that the delay caused her additional worry.

The service admitted the delay and the lack of communication and, as an outcome, provided the complainant with a personalised letter of apology which set out the agreed plan for future communication with the family.

#### **Improvements:**

- That the parent will receive monthly updates over the phone from the Social Worker allocated to the case and that any updates on the young person's care or wellbeing will be shared with them as soon as possible. This has since been implemented and updates take place on a monthly basis.
- The Social Worker and Team Manager will provide a personalised written apology by 9th June 2023. An apology letter was sent to the parent on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2023.
- That the young person will be spoken to, to obtain permission to share information with his mother about individual roles of professionals working with him. Following this, the young person was spoken to and advised that he did not want anyone to speak to his mother about any specific work with other professionals.
- That the allocated IRO will contact the parent following the young person's reviews to give a general update on what has been discussed. This is now implemented and takes place following reviews.
- That the service will take forward the issues around the young person's school regarding a move to a different school. The social worker is actively pursuing this on young person's behalf.
- Information about the importance of regular communication with parents or others about children or young people cared for by the Council, was shared across the Children in our Care Service within team meetings and individual supervisions.

**Action:** The complaint was in respect of financial support for an SGO holder along with the quality of communication by the Kinship Team when requesting updates in respect of this matter. The complainant disputed the outcome of the financial assessment as it was felt that this would cause financial hardship to the family. The complainant was also unhappy as the letter did not outline how to appeal the financial decision.

#### **Improvements:**

- As an outcome to this complaint, it was recommended that the financial support was reinstated and backdated to the point that it was stopped. Information has now been given to enable the complainant to formally appeal the decision.
- The letter, which is sent to families following financial assessments / decisions for SGO holders has now been updated to include information about how to appeal.
- That the support and information regarding Kinship Care would be shared with the family. This has now been completed by the Team Manager of Kinship Care.

- A worker has been allocated to the family as their point of contact and will carry out regular visits to go over what the family are entitled to as SGO connected carer and to discuss what support and guidance is required to meet the family's needs.
- All actions have since been implemented and visits undertaken. The nominated worker is now in regular contact with the family and can resolve issues or queries as they arise.

### Children in our Care

**Action:** A complaint was investigated which set out concerns about a commissioned service, procured for a young person who required some personal care tasks. Following the commissioning of the service, it was found that the provider was not registered with the CQC, which is a requirement when personal care tasks are carried out. The care package was immediately suspended. Within the complaint, there were also elements of poor communication by the service in relation to updates to the family on the progress of the care package.

### Improvements:

- Commissioning and social work staff within the Children with Disabilities Team are now actively working together to ensure that when young people require a commissioned service, should they require personal care tasks, that in all cases the commissioned provider is CQC registered. Also, this will ensure that all relevant documentation is kept up to date to enable potential care providers to consider whether they are able to meet the needs of the young person concerned.
- It has been agreed that the social worker will contact all families waiting for a service on a fortnightly basis with an update, unless contact has already been achieved through other means such as CIN Reviews and Care Team meetings.
- That commissioning profiles for children and young people are regularly updated to ensure that the profile is kept up to date and current, in particular when in relation to the care needs and care tasks that will be required as part of the care package.

### Child Protection Unit

**Action:** Following a complaint from a new parent in relation to Child Protection action being taken due to the circumstances of the child's birth, an issue was raised regarding the refusal to allow the parent to take a hair strand test. It was felt by the worker that the tests could only be provided when a letter of proceedings had been issued or during other legal action. This information was subsequently found to be incorrect.

**Improvement:** Following the investigation, it was agreed that, in future, Children's Services should consider the use of hair strand testing on a case-by-case basis following requests. This instruction was shared across all Practice Leads within an email from the Principal Social Worker. Practice Leads were asked to disseminate this information across all social work teams / staff. This was completed on 15 September 2023.

## 14.0 Compliments

- 14.1 Between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024, Children's Services received 145 compliments about either individual workers or teams. This means that compared with the number of statutory and corporate complaints received during 2023/24, (27), 84% (145) were compliments about Children's Services.

Children's Social & Supporting Services	Total	%
Children and Families Business Support Team	8	5.52%
Childrens Residential	1	0.69%
Children in our Care Teams	5	3.45%
Contextual Safeguarding Team	2	1.38%
Children with Disabilities - Respite - Grove House	31	21.38%

Children with Disabilities Team	5	3.45%
Domestic Violence and Abuse Team	8	5.52%
Emergency Duty Team - Childrens	2	1.38%
Family Hubs & Play Service	10	6.90%
Fostering Team	1	0.69%
Integrated Referral Team	8	5.52%
Kinship Care	1	0.69%
Safeguarding, Care Planning Teams	22	15.17%
Safeguarding Children Unit	8	5.52%
Supporting Children & Family Team	1	0.69%
Specialist Support Team	2	1.38%
Targeted Family Support	20	13.79%
Youth Justice Team	6	4.14%
Travel Care Team - Childrens	4	2.76%
<b>Total</b>	<b>145</b>	

## 14.2 Examples of compliments received.

### Integrated Referral Team

*"We've just had the foster carer review for PR, carer for MR and I wanted to share P's positive feedback about ER - P could not speak highly enough about the support given, including the regular communication and updates, quick responses to questions, advocating for M and keeping her experience and needs central. This support is really appreciated by P, and in turn by me as her E's Supervising Social Worker."*

*"To D.. We just wanted to say a HUGE thank you for everything you have done for us. Love D, C. and L. x."*

### Children in our Care

*"Good afternoon. In an age where criticism can be more common than positive comments, I felt it important that I send you this email. L.D is, in my opinion, doing a fab job. She is always quick to respond to my emails; when she says she is going to do something, she does, and she is always so supportive and proactive when I have communicated concerns or emailed/called to ask for advice. Like I say, we are often too quick to criticise, but not today! I hope you are able to pass this on to her and congratulate her on the hard work she is doing. Many thanks and happy Friday. Mrs R F."*

*"Morning C. This is just to feedback positive comments made by both S and W during my visit yesterday about your involvement with S. who feel listened to by you, that you are available when needed and W is impressed about your overall involvement with S. They both sang your praises throughout my visit. Will record this under good practice, as I think it all excellent people' skills."*

### Children's Business Support

*"I just wanted to make you aware of A-M going out of her way to support one of our care leavers yesterday. A young person presented as homeless and was upset in reception. A-M was able to calm him down and arranged for the duty worker to come and see him. Unfortunately, Housing was unable to offer anything appropriate. A-M contacted a provision she was aware of, and it was possible to make arrangements for the young man to stay there. This was a much better outcome and resolved the issue thanks to A-M. This is just one example of A-M going over and above for our care leavers and I felt this should be acknowledged."*

*I have just signed off the Minutes you did for the H.. children - what a pleasure to read! Thank you for being so good at what you do - it makes it a joy to read through. Kind Regards, LG"*

### Children with Disabilities - Grove House Respite

*"K called in to drop of thank you card, some chocolate treats and £100 donation to the children's amenities account. The card read as follows: 'To A.. and all staff and young people at Grove House. Thank you for all my lovely visits to your home. I've seen some excellent work and practice and I*

know how hard you all work to make sure each young person has a lovely time at grove house. You are all amazing! Keep up the good work. I will miss my monthly visits which have always been a pleasure. All the very best, love K xx" This is a little treat for young people. Please buy something they would like (I thought it would be more useful than easter eggs! Love K".

"During K's TAF meeting we discussed her social interaction and experiences at Grove House. The whole cohort across school, social worker and mum all gave Grove House 10/10 rating, which all said they don't ever give. Mum was asked if she was happy and if she thought there was anything we could do outside her social experiences which she isn't getting at home. Mum said she is happy as at home she doesn't get out as much and loves the fact she goes to the park and uses the equipment as this is something she struggles with at home. Lots of praise for the service and the experiences K...has here. Nothing she would change mum said."

### **Children with Disabilities Team**

"Dear H., This is just a small token of our deep appreciation for all the tremendous help you give us with Y.. - we are very grateful to you. Wish you an enjoyable and restful holiday from Y & N. H"

"I thought I would share the text message I received from parent (DP) who I supported with attending a hospital appointment for their child (AM) who was having an operation today (08/02/2024) at the RVI. " Thanks D.. and thank you again for today. I don't know how I'd have made it that little bit less stressful for him dealing with taxis and things in this weather with the traffic. I really appreciate your help and all your support for me also during the day." A. had a successful operation and is home safe and sound with his mum and siblings."

### **Child Protection Team**

"I would like to comment on how well S.. managed LT's ICPC yesterday. S. ensured the families focus was on L. at all times and this helped to reduce the risk of any conflict. These adults have a lot of history where conflict and violence has been a feature. So well done. I would also like to pass on D.. positive comments about how the ICPC went. D.. said "S.. is passionate and he made me feel comfortable".

### **Family Hubs and Play Service**

Hi there, thank you for providing us with a service by such a fantastic team member. H.. is great she goes above and beyond to make sure everyone's happy. Can't recommend her enough as she's doing such an amazing job every Tuesday 10 till 12. From me personally and on behalf of Dunston Community Centre we all thank you again, would like to praise her work and felt we needed to let you all know that she's just brilliant and we love having her. M..

### **Targeted Family Support – DAT**

"To K.. Just a little note to say how grateful I am for all the amazing work you have done in supporting me through the most difficult time I have ever experienced, Thank you for always being at the end of the phone, thanks for all your work with the orders and policing matters and thank you for all the help in getting me and the children to where we are now. The work you and the team do, does not get the recognition you all deserve, I always talk about the amazing work you do, and I know I wouldn't be where I am now without it. You are fabulous at what you do, and I will never forget what you have given me - the strength to say 'enough, no more'. You have enabled me to begin a new chapter which I'm sure will be a happy one and every time I smile, I'll remember you. Thanks so much, L x (Thanks to J.. too for the way he presented the freedom project)."

"Just emailing to say how much I have appreciated the help and support I've received from the Domestic Abuse Team since 2020. You are all amazing and very passionate in giving all the help and support that's needed. I would like to extend my thanks further to you as I could not have got through this court process without you. You have been my rock and helped me and stepped in when I've needed you no matter what time of day and for that I'm truly grateful. Just having someone to talk things through with makes all the difference. I hope this horrible journey I've been on has now come to an end and myself and my girls can have a happy life. But a little sad I know longer have you, but I do know I can contact you anytime. I'm so happy I got the outcome I thought I would never get. Onwards and upwards now I can finally box this experience off in my head and

guide A to do the same Thank you, L.”

### **Specialist Support Teams**

*“I just wanted to pass on my sincerest thanks to G.. and the work he has done with L.A. G's dedication to his role as L.A's YOT worker has been incredible, and he has gone above and beyond to ensure L.A and his family have been supported throughout this whole process. His genuine care for L.A and his family is evident and something the multi-disciplinary team within Aycliffe have all commented on. I have been at Aycliffe for twenty years and G. is one of the very best, if not the best, YOT workers I had the pleasure to work with. G.. seems like a very humble man so I am sure he will be mortified that I have sent this email. Kind Regards S.. Manager, Aycliffe Secure Centre.”*

### **Fostering Team**

*“Mr B was full of praise for the help and support he received from R.. in the past before he got SGO of his grandson. He wanted me to pass this on to make you aware.”*

### **Safeguarding & Care Planning Teams**

*“To Y. C and the team Thank you for our lovely experience it couldn't have went better. It's been lovely getting to know you, love from S.. N.. and A.. xx*

*“To E.S. Thank you so much for all the time you put into this lovely book for A, We're really grateful. We loved reading it and A loves looking at the pictures. It's already helping us to do early stage life story work. We love its honest approach and simple language, and the way people are brought to life and A's different family parts brought together. Thank you so much again for this important bit of life story work - we will always be grateful to you for the time you spent putting it together”.*

### **Supporting Children and Families Team**

*“Hi P.. this is L.... I just want to say thank you for taking me to see my dad and that the visits meant the world to me. Especially since if you didn't do this for me, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to make memories that I'll cherish forever with my dad. Unfortunately, he passed away from a heart attack which you most likely already know. However, we both appreciate what you've done for us. Thank you for giving me memories which I wouldn't have if it weren't for you. I'll never forget what you've done for me and him :) ”*

### **Travel Care Team – Children's**

*“ I just want to praise J.W on her help with me and R. R really doesn't deal with change and I'm trying my best to keep him in Carr Hill school as he is really struggling with moving J. went over and beyond to help me and I can't thank her enough she is a real asset to your team and made one little boy very happy thanks from our hearts, C.M.”*

### **Youth Justice Service**

*“On behalf of Y... and myself we wanted to put into writing how delighted we were to have been involved in such a positive End Panel It truly showed how effective a Referral Order can be when a dedicated and highly professional Case Manager along with others puts into practice, sessions which in turn provides the young person with the motivation towards a better future This was, in our opinion, what T... expressed Our communication with T... case manager was exemplary from communication of review dates to the outcome of the end panel Congratulations to all concerned Two very proud Panel Members HD & Y B.”*

**Contact Officer:** Alison Routledge, X2408