

Date: 5 September 2024

TITLE OF REPORT: Children and Families Service - Annual Report on Services
Complaints, Compliments and Representations - April 2023 to March
2024

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

Summary

Cabinet considered the attached report on 25 June 2023.

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 2023 – March 2024.
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 all five priorities within the Council's Corporate Plan 23 - 28.
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 2023 – 31 March 2024.

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. The 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 2023/24 the number of complaints and representations dealt with was as follows:

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).

Children's Services received eighteen Stage 1 complaints during 2023/24. This is up from eight Stage 1 complaints in 2022/23.

During 2023/24, 56% (10) complaints were received about support from workers or the overall service to families of children receiving a service.

In 2023/24, 47% (7) of all 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.

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).

This evidences that Children's Services are committed to resolve concerns at the lowest level where possible.

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 by an Investigating Officer outside of the service complained about, with oversight by an external Independent Person.

There were also no Stage 3 Review Panels held during this time.

During 2023/24, 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.

Points of Interest

7. The following key points may be of interest:

Complaints brought by relatives of children receiving a service accounted for 78% (14) of all complaint referrals.

One complaint was raised directly by a cared for young person. This complaint was regarding placement issues. 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 works closely with those who raise concerns and, in most cases, can resolve these successfully.

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. However, most children and young people receiving a service are allocated a social worker within the Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams.

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).

18% (3) of complaints were regarding the services provided by the Integrated Referral Team.

During 2023/24, Children's Services received five Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LG&SCO) referrals. All five referrals were considered by the LG&SCO and closed as requiring no further action.

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.

Brief Examples of Service Improvements identified during 2023/24

Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams

Action: A complaint was received where it was alleged that all those with PR had not been enabled to have their voices heard during the assessment process. 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.

Children in our Care

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 explaining the outcome of the financial assessment 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 information about the support to SGO connected carers has been shared with the family to inform them about what services are available to support them in their role.
- 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.

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 stated 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.

Future Objectives

9. Objectives for 2024/25 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. That all complaint outcomes letters are quality assured and signed off by Practice Leads to ensure good quality and, where appropriate, restorative responses.
 - iv. Ensure that the number of complaints progressing to Stage 2 and 3 remain low.
 - v. 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 Compliments, Comments and Complaints Team 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 other representations and ensuring that this results in continuous service improvement.