

Children's social care comments, compliments and complaints annual report 2016/17

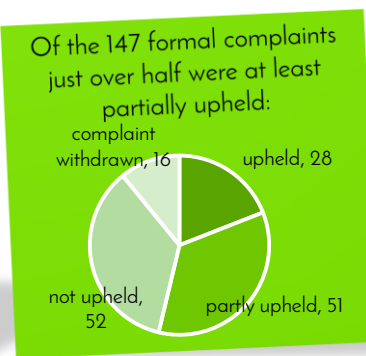
COMMENTS
COMPLIMENTS
& COMPLAINTS

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Children's social care 2016/17 complaints & representations key facts & figures

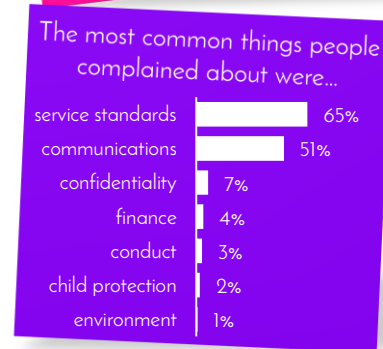
Children's social care provided services to **3,570** children and young people, as of 31 March 2017.

In 2016/17, children's social care received **147** formal complaints plus **26** informal ones. **15** complaints were directly from young people; 13 supported by an advocate.



Children's social care issues can be complex & timescales can be protracted. In 2016/17:

Complaints	Average time taken
Stage 1	145 15 days
Stage 2	1 109 days
Stage 3	1 108 days



In 2016/17, children's social care also received **91** compliments. **42%** related to the standard of practice in social work followed by the standard of service (**20%**).

If a complainant remains unhappy after completing the Council's complaints process, they may take their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO). In 2016/17, the LGO received **17** complaints about education & children's services. They investigated **3** complaints, all of which were upheld.

Listening to service users' complaints helps services improve by helping managers identify changes that are required. Some of the key learning points from 2016/17 include: explaining why decisions were made; apologising for mistakes; managing changes in social worker; better case monitoring; providing effective advocacy; and striving to resolve issues informally in the first instance.

Having your say about children's social care

If you have a problem with children's social care services or if you are unhappy about something that is happening to you, this can usually be sorted out by speaking to someone you trust like your social worker, keyworker or foster carer. But if they can't put things right for you, then you can make a complaint. You can do so by asking to speak to your **children's rights officer**. The children's rights officer makes regular visits to children's homes in Coventry or you can ring them on **0800 0272 118**.

Introduction

Local Authorities are required by law (Children Act 1989, plus subsequent changes including the Local Authority Social Services Complaints Regulations (1990) as a result of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003) to have a system for receiving representations made by or on behalf of children who use the social care services they provide or commission. These include: social work services, residential care, fostering, adoption and the provision of support to families, children with disabilities and young people in trouble with the law.

Representations are defined as comments, compliments and complaints.

Local authorities are required by law to appoint a complaints officer to oversee all aspects of the procedure.

Some complaints received do not meet the criteria to be dealt with under the statutory procedure. When this is the case, these are registered under the Council's corporate complaints procedure. The arrangements for handling these complaints are different from the statutory process in terms of timescales and the independence of the people who investigate and review the complaints.

The People Directorate has a nominated officer assigned to the management of representations from children and others who present feedback on children's social care services.

The purpose of the comments, compliments and complaints system is to ensure that:

- the views and experiences of people who use services are heard;
- positive feedback is used to develop services and acknowledge good practice;
- things that have gone wrong are put right;
- the organisation learns from both positive and negative feedback; and
- the organisation sustains its focus on service users / customers / citizens.

As part of the Council's commitment to openness, quality assurance, service development and listening and learning from service users, this report provides summary information from comments, compliments and complaints received under the statutory procedures in relation to children's social care services between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2017.

Particular reference is made to the range of representations received and responses to them and specific trends and issues that emerged in the reporting period.

Summary

Between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2017, children's social care services dealt with 5,395 referrals; this represents a substantial decrease from the previous year (7,987). As of 31 March 2017, children's social care were providing services to 3,570 children and young people, a 2% decrease compared to 3,645 a year ago (31 March 2016).

The total number of statutory and informal complaints received about children's social care services in 2016/17 was 173 (147 statutory complaints and 26 informal complaints); an increase from 133 statutory complaints in 2015/16. 91 compliments were received in the year compared with 68 in 2015/16.

A small number of complaints (15) were from children and young people themselves or from an advocate complaining on behalf of a child; the remainder were from adults. There has been a decrease in the number of children or young people using an advocate to make a complaint, compared to 17 in 2015/16.

Two main themes could be identified as arising from the complaints by and on behalf of users in 2016/17: issues regarding poor communication with users; and concerns about the standards of service provided.

Themes from compliments were predominantly around the good standard of practice received from individual social workers and the overall standard of service received from teams.

Responding to feedback

Comments, compliments and complaints can tell the Council a great deal about the service users' experiences of service delivery, professional practice and the outcome of management decisions. Children's social care services welcome this feedback and encourages children, their advocates and anyone who uses the service or who is affected by it, to make their views known.

Promoting feedback

It is vitally important that the comments, complaints and compliments system is easily accessible. This maximises the opportunities for individuals to make their views known. Complaints can be accepted through the contact centre via a visit to the centre, by letter, by an online form or by telephone. Complaints may also be made directly to the team that is providing them with a service. Sometimes, complaints are also made via elected members (councillors) the chief executive; or directly to senior managers. Complaints can also be referred to the Council from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO). Complainants who contact the complaints team directly are encouraged to use the contact centre to ensure that their complaint can be processed efficiently.

The majority of complainants chose to make a complaint through the contact centre. Statistics have shown that this has been an increase on the previous year.

Of particular importance is the need to inform children of their opportunity to make representations and to find methods they can easily use. There have been 15 complaints from children and young people themselves this year, which is a decrease on last year (17). Work has taken place with Barnardo's advocacy service to ensure that more feedback is received from children and young people. More work will be undertaken to improve this number further in 2017/18.

The table below indicates how many complaints were received and method of complaint.

Method	Number of complaints
Email	114
Form	28
In person	7
Letter	13
Telephone	9
Not known	2
Total	173 (including informal)

Advocacy

Since 1 April 2004, the Advocacy Services and Representations Regulations 2004, have required councils to make arrangements for the provision of advocacy to children and young people making representations under the Children Act 1989. Of the 15 children and young people making complaints during the year, 13 used an advocate to support them in making their complaint. Since April 2006, the advocacy service has been commissioned from Barnardo's.

Representations received in 2016/17

Comments	Compliments	Complaints
0	91	173 (147 statutory & 26 informal)

The total number of statutory complaints received about children's social care services in 2016/17 were 147 (plus 26 informal complaints); an increase from 133 statutory complaints in 2015/16.

	Compliments recorded	Formal statutory complaints
2009/10	134	123
2010/11	145	148
2011/12	122	116
2012/13	126	133
2013/14	85	102
2014/15	66	117
2015/16	68	133
2016/17	91	147

Complaints

Listening to service users' complaints helps services improve by helping managers identify changes that are required. The statutory procedures offer a 3-stage process, and the corporate procedures offer a 2-stage process, both of which aim to provide a satisfactory resolution to any complaint, preferably as quickly as possible.

The table below sets out the number of complaints in 2016/17 by resolution:

Formal statutory complaints	2016/17	
Upheld	28	19%
Partly upheld	51	35%
Not upheld	52	35%
Complaint withdrawn by complainant	16	11%
Open	0	0%
Total	147	

The following table sets out the number of complaints by team:

Team	Complaints
South neighbourhood team	27
North East neighbourhood team	22
North West neighbourhood team	17
Route 21 (leaving care service)	17
All ages disability team (0-25)	16
Referral and assessment service	13
Fostering	8
Looked after children	8
Multi-agency safeguarding hub	7
Adoption	3
Other	3
Safeguarding children's service	2
Special educational needs	2
Youth service	2
Total	147

Comments

People may also express disappointment, disagreement or observations about services without necessarily wanting to complain. Feedback of this nature will be recorded as a comment on the Council's central customer relationship management system and forwarded to the relevant service area for consideration and action.

No comments were recorded in 2016/17.

Compliments

Compliments tell the Council what people appreciate about services and the way they are provided. Positive feedback also encourages and motivates staff and enables them to celebrate their good performance. Every compliment received is shared with the individual or team to whom it refers and copied to the relevant managers.

91 compliments were received in the year. The majority of compliments (42%) reflected satisfaction about the standard of practice in social work; and nearly one-fifth were compliments about the standard of service provided by a social worker and/or child and family worker. Other compliments received were categorised were about good partnership working; child-centred practice; and the quality of communication.

Compliments recorded include those from other professionals and partner organisations, for instance, advocates, police officers, judges, schools; as well as compliments from foster carers and service users, for instance, parents/carers, children and young people, and other family members.

The following are a sample of compliments received by children's social care in 2016/17:

Children / young people	Foster carers	Parents / guardians
"She is the best social worker ever because she does everything to keep me safe and happy and if she is free then she is always there for me and comes and talk to me when I'm at school and home... She brings shine to every day and sparkles like a star."	"She is brilliant, her support to me and the work with the two girls who are placed with me is fantastic. She is great with the girls, she's following their life story work and does all the tasks that are needed I'm really impressed with the support she provides us and it makes a real difference."	"My daughter wanted me to say she had a great time at young carers this holiday. She's made me take her back to Coombe Abbey twice so she could show me what she did. Thanks for including her."
"Thank you for everything. I miss you time to get on well with my new social worker!"		"My son absolutely loved it and hasn't stopped talking to everyone about it. Thank you so much for arranging, it's great to see him have some fun on his own."
"Thank you for supporting me and my mum for twelve weeks. You've been so much help!"		"My daughter had a brilliant time at the party and last week's activities, her confidence is really building each time she attends and I'm so glad she gets a break. Keep doing what you do!"
"She always kept to her promises... everything was completed I felt like I could be honest with her and that I gained someone who I can trust."		"Thanks for including my son – it does him the world of good hanging out with children who know what's going on for him!! P.S. he loved his certificate, its pride of place on the fridge, you always go the extra mile!!"
"Without your support, I doubt I would be as happy as I am today. You also helped me with college, finding a job and other things which I really appreciate you doing."		

Local resolution (Stage 1)

The service aim to resolve problems, whenever possible, at Stage 1. At this stage, the allocated manager (usually the manager responsible for the service being complained about) will try to identify what's needed so that the complainant feels able to continue to work with the service. Examples of the types of resolutions offered can be found later in this report.

There were 147 complaints, of which 145 were resolved at Stage 1. That is, 99% of complaints were resolved at Stage 1 of the complaints process, this is an increase from the percentage of 89% during 2015/16. More emphasis on local resolution has been introduced this year, helping improve the percentage resolved at stage one of the process.

Formal investigation (Stage 2)

In certain circumstances a formal investigation of the circumstances leading to a complaint is a more appropriate response, although this tends to be a lengthier process. This may be required when complainants remain dissatisfied with the conclusion reached at Stage 1 or when the complaint is particularly complex or involves a number of service areas. These investigations are always conducted by someone outside the direct line management of the service and the person about whom the complaint is being made.

In 2016/17, there was one investigation carried out at Stage 2, compared with seven in 2015/16. At the time of reporting, the complaint had been successfully resolved at Stage 2.

This investigation was undertaken by external investigators. At the conclusion of all Stage 2 investigations the investigating officers' reports are read by senior managers for them to consider and act upon before a response is sent to the complainant.

Review panel (Stage 3)

Within the **statutory** complaints procedure, where complainants are dissatisfied with the outcome of a formal investigation at Stage 2, they can request that a review panel of three independent people be convened to examine the investigation. Review panels can make recommendations to the Director of Children's Services if they conclude that the complaint is justified, or that more could be done to resolve the matter, or if they feel the Council should take action to prevent similar situations arising in the future.

One complaint was considered by a review panel this year. The panel upheld the findings of the Stage 2 investigations and no further action was required. A single complaint, considered at Stage 2 during the reporting period, may be considered by a panel if the complainant makes a final decision to move to a Stage 3 review.

Note: this is different from the corporate complaints procedure, where no Stage 3 exists.

Timescales

The legislation and corporate procedures set out timescales for dealing with complaints at each stage of the process. The timescales are:

	Legislation (statutory children's social care complaints)	Corporate complaints
Stage 1	10 working days (can be extended to 20 working days)	10 working days
Stage 2	25 working days (can be extended to 65 working days)	20 working days
Stage 3	Within 30 working days of complainant's request	Not applicable

The complexity of social care issues means that complaint resolution can sometimes be protracted and achievement of the time-scales can suffer as a result. The complaints officer, therefore, undertakes rigorous monitoring of progress in relation to responding to complaints.

The table below sets out the complaints by stage, and the timescales in 2016/17:

Complaint stage	Timescales	Number of complaints
Stage 1	Within 10 working days	73
	Over 10 working days	72
Stage 2	Within 25 working days	0
	Over 25 working days	1
Stage 3	Within 30 working days	0
	Over 30 working days	1
Total		147

Complaint stage	Number of complaints	Average timescales
Stage 1	145	15 days
Stage 2	1	109 days
Stage 3	1	108 days

The average time in days to complete Stage 1 complaints was 15 working days in 2016/17 compared to 30 days in 2015/16. Adherence to timescales had previously been a challenge so weekly meetings were introduced with senior managers, so that complaint timescales were improved.

Investigations of Stage 2 complaints under the statutory procedure often need to be extended beyond the 25 working days timescale due to the complexity of the issues being considered. In these situations, the importance of keeping the complainant informed and securing their agreement to an extension of the timescale, is recognised and addressed. However, there were some delays in completing Stage 2 complaints with the average time in days to complete Stage 2 complaints being 109 working days in 2016/17. This is still an improvement from 148 working days in 2015/16.

There was one Stage 3 complaint, and the review panel took over 30 days but the response to their recommendations were also completed within time.

Complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

If the complainant remains unhappy following the outcome of the Council's complaints process, they have the option of taking their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO).

In 2016/17, the LGO received 17 complaints with the category of education and children's services. Of these, three investigations were held, of which all were upheld by the LGO. This compared to two (both upheld) in 2015/16.

Identified issues and resolutions

Compliments and complaints by category

Compliments	Total
Standard of practice (social work)	38
Standards of service	18
Good partnership working	5
Good child focus	5
Good communication	2

Complaints	Total
Standards of service	95
Poor communication	75
Breach of confidentiality	10
Finance	6
Staff conduct	5
Child protection issues	3
Standard of environment	1

Note: compliments and complaints cover more than one category.

Resolutions

All staff dealing with complaints are encouraged to make any reasonable effort to ensure that the complaint is resolved. Common resolutions this year were:

- a full explanation of why decisions were made;
- apologies for mistakes made and any distress caused;
- a change in social worker, where this could be managed in the best interests of the child;
- the opportunity for complainants to ensure their view is recorded on the social care file;
- additional monitoring of the case through the usual supervision route;
- provision of advocacy to ensure child's voice could be heard; and
- to aim to deal with complaints informally in the first instance – this has achieved a positive resolution in many cases, which in turn has decreased complaint escalation.

For some complaints, compensation was paid. The key principle for any financial remedies paid is that a remedy should, as far as possible, put the complainant back in the position they would have been in but for the fault identified. Typically, compensation will be considered if a service user has had to use their own finances due to the delay in offering a service or if their belongings have been damaged or lost through no fault of theirs. The following table sets out compensation paid in 2016/17:

Amount	Detail
£52.50	To savings account
£60	ISA savings
£100	Delay in response
£113	£100 towards carpet plus £13 towards travel
£200	Inconvenience, time for response (LGO)
£250	Nursery funding
£300	To savings account
£300	Court proceedings
£500	Distress caused
£1,000	Compensation regarding delay
£1,000	Funding for move
£1,875 + £500	Settlement costing + premium service fee
TOTAL: £6,250⁵⁰	

Service improvements

Upon completion of the complaint investigation, officers are asked to identify specific service improvements as a result of the complaint. On the completion of Stage 2 upheld complaints, managers have provided action plans that detail recommendations across all services to improve services. These are regularly monitored by the complaints officer and are forwarded to the senior leadership meetings for regular review.

Examples of some of these improvements are:

- re-emphasising to social workers the importance of keeping data safe and records are stored in compliance with the data protection act – with training supported and advised by the Council's information governance team and by the Council's information management strategic group;
- improvement to quality of social workers assessment and analysis;
- reduce drift and delay in care planning and assessments are up to date;
- children with disability to be assessed as a child in need;
- common assessment process and robustness of the process to continue to be reviewed; and
- reducing timeframe for responding to complaints, by providing support to front line managers in responding to complaints at Stage 1 and reinforcing the need to return calls in accordance with corporate timescales.

Progress on actions

A number of actions were identified in the 2015/16 report. Progress on these actions is as follows.

Distribution of new leaflets

Newly designed complaint leaflets, explaining the process for children and young people were distributed to all service areas and service users.

Further revision of the Stage 1 process

The appointment of a full time interim complaints officer enabled all Stage 1 complaints to be monitored and managed more effectively. For the first three quarters of 2016/17 year the average time in days to complete Stage 1 complaints was 13 working days, compared to 18 working days in quarter 4. Further work has continued in 2016/17 to streamline the process and a more informal approach to investigate complaints has been undertaken to ensure that, where possible complaints are not escalated within the complaints process and are resolved more quickly.

Service improvement and learning for 2017/18

Close working with Barnardo's and the Children's Champion to ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard

The complaints officer is now working more closely with Barnardo's and meets with them on a regular basis to review cases. Work is to be done with the Children's Champion to gain more feedback from children and young people, including ways to improve the way children and young people can make complaints, compliments and representations. The Complaints Officer will attend Voices of Care and Children's Planning Groups to gain feedback on improvements that could be made.

Review on ease of access to complaints process

There will be a review on how children and young people can access the complaints process. The Complaints Officer will work directly with children and young people in conjunction with the Children's Champion to ensure the Council has a process that is accessible and a complaint is easy to process.

Further revision of the Stage 1 process

There has already been an improvement in the average time in days to complete Stage 1 complaints (from 19 to 15 working days). In 2017/18 the Complaints Officer will meet with all teams on a regular basis to ensure complaints are monitored and dealt within statutory guidelines. Review of all Stage 1 complaints at the point of contact will also take place to attempt to resolve complaints informally where possible.

Further revision of the Stage 2 process

There were significant delays in completing Stage 2 complaints in 2015/16 with the average time in days to completion being 148 working days, instead of the 25 working days statutory guidelines. In 2016/17 the average working days for completion was 109. The Complaints Officer will meet with managers on a regular basis to monitor and manage the complaints to ensure they are completed in a timely manner. A complaints report will also be provided to the senior leadership team.

RAG report and action plans

A RAG report was introduced in Q4 to ensure managers were able to have an overview of complaints in their area. It enabled current complaints to be monitored and discussed at Management Team Meetings, allowing joint working and responses. This process has continued into 2017/18 as it has been effective in monitoring complaints. Stage 2 complaint action plans were also introduced in Q4 and are recommended resolutions from upheld complaints to be completed for all service areas. This is monitored by the Complaints Officer. The Complaints Officer will link with workforce development as and when required to recommend any training provision.

Training for team and managers on complaint processes

Complaints Officer to provide training sessions on all aspects of complaint processes. Feedback sessions will be provided on positive and negative areas of categories of complaints.

Specific service area improvements/learning which have been identified

In the South Neighbourhood and North-East Neighbourhood all telephone calls made to social workers who are not in the office are referred to the duty social worker/senior practitioner/team manager in that order to ensure that there is a reduction in complaints relating to poor communication/poor service. If callers refuses to give their details, managers have requested that a note is made of this.

In the North West Neighbourhood Team, in terms of learning from complaints and closing the loop staff will be reminded that they should respond within a day and if they are unable to do so that they pass to duty to respond. Managers have been reminded of the timescales for completion and to try to find resolution where possible informally. Managers are liaising with admin to ensure an escalation process if the worker concerned is not in the office.

In the Referral and Assessment Service, officers have been reminded to adhere to data protection principles and manage information sensitively. To reinforce this message and area of practice all staff members have been asked to undertake data protection training (this is ongoing and subject to monitoring).

Workers have been reminded to quality assure documents being shared with families to eradicate third party data being breached. Officers are reminded to liaise with absent parents and make them part of the assessment process. Officers have been told documents need to be shared in a timely manner with relevant parties. Officers have been reminded to ensure calls are responded to and in the case of professionals, social workers are advised to share their work mobile numbers and in respect of service users, a system is in place whereby in the absence of the allocated social workers, a duty social workers will take the call and remind the allocated social workers to follow up on their return as necessary.

In the Looked After Children service, themes identified are around poor communication, concerns regarding the standard of service and disputes in relation to care plans. This highlights a need for improvement around communication, accessibility, participation and overall customer service. Social workers do work hard to ensure the needs of children and young people are met, however there is some evidence of a lack of sharing of information and open communication channels to ensure that all involved, including children, young people and their parents are consistently kept informed and included. Having reviewed the complaints, on large the worries in relation to standard of service and care plan disputes are due to poor communication. Some work has started in cluster meetings, and workers are reminded to ensure effective communication, responding within appropriate timescales, and improving diary management to factor in space to return calls and respond to emails. Workers are reminded of the necessity and benefits of working together collaboratively, and reiterating the importance of regular team around the child meetings to include all those involved. Team managers are improving their oversight of such issues in supervision, and addressing on an individual basis where necessary to improve the communication skills of social workers. All social workers and team managers are reminded to quality assure care plans and any other documents before approval and before distributing. Dip sampling activity is taking place in relation to care plans with managers, senior practitioners and social workers to identify areas of concern/strength and to action plan for improvement, taking on board comments made by children and parents. Social workers are reminded and encouraged to ensure that children, young people and their families are invited to and supported to attend important meetings such as lac reviews and pep meetings, wherever possible. Wider work is being implemented, including training to develop and improve the skills of the workforce and to ultimately provide a consistently good service.

In the children's disability team (all ages disability team 0-14), team managers and senior practitioners have been working with social workers reinforcing the importance of ensuring parents' involvement as part of the

assessment process. Workers are reminded that children, young people and their parent's views are integral to an assessment, and that building positive working relationships improves communication and ensures the process is inclusive. Dip sampling has taken place with team managers around the quality of children and family assessments, and an action plan has been implemented. This plan includes introducing clear check points for review, designing a development/ training day, focussed on assessment and improving analysis, and ensuring good management oversight and grip. Social workers are also regularly reminded of the importance of good communication, keeping children and families informed and included throughout. It is reinforced that workers and managers will not complete or sign off assessments unless they have been shared with families, and managers are improving their quality assurance of all documents. Managers are also improving their oversight and performance management within supervision, addressing issues on an individual basis where necessary.

In fostering and adoption, officers will initiate a review of the arrangements for finance panel and pathways to care agreements to clarify policies for these arrangements and will ensure that Finance panel includes representatives of senior management in both services to enable consistency of approach across both services. Improve recording and detail of financial support packages to adopters and special guardians to ensure there is clarity about what has been agreed and for how long. Review arrangements for financial support to special guardians ensure that these are compliant with national guidance without applying this guidance inconsistently. Ensure that health advice is available to panel as needed. Clarify message about approval process to carers transferring from another agency. Review methods for undertaking statutory checks for other local authorities to include consideration of methods of checking adult services records and to ensure that all household members are checked as requested. Work is also in place to ensure that the business service centre have access to adult services electronic records system.

In Route 21, the care leaving service, the majority of complaints have been around the standard of service and poor communication young people have received. All of these have been due to workers leaving and tasks not being finished or handed over correctly. Service improvements to address these issues including 1) working to ensure stable workforce and planned transitions when new workers become involved; 2) Team managers to ensure they meet with workers before they leave and review all cases for outstanding actions; 3) Ensure that when a worker leaves, all their young people are notified and have a named point of contact in their absence; 4) Rationale for any decisions to be clearly recorded on file so this can be explained to young people in the absence of their workers. Also in Route 21, in relation to financial issues around staying put, a review of staying put is being undertaken. With regard to Subject Access requests not being completed in a timely manner, this issue has been flagged with the strategic lead for looked after children as there is no capacity within the service to meet timescales that are required.

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