

# Children's services complaints and representations annual report 2017/18



# Children's services 2017/18 complaints & representations key facts & figures

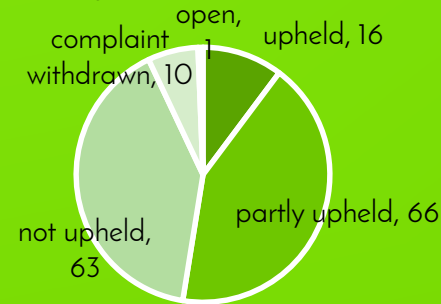


Children's services had **3,623** open referrals as of 31 March 2018.



In 2017/18, children's services received **179** complaints (156 were statutory, 12 corporate, and 11 informal). **21** complaints were made by young people; **7** supported by an advocate.

Of the 156 formal complaints just over half were at least partially upheld:



Children's services complaints can be complex & timescales can be protracted. In 2017/18:

Complaints		Average time taken	
Stage 1	153	16 days	
Stage 2	3	125 days	
Stage 3	0	N/A	

The most common things people complained about were...



In 2017/18, children's social care also received **64** compliments. Compliments were about the standard of practice, partnership working, taking a child-centred approach, and communication.

If a complainant remains unhappy after completing our complaints process, they may take their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO). In 2017/18, the LGSCO received **29** complaints about education & children's services. They investigated **3** social care complaints; all were upheld.

Listening to service users' complaints helps services improve by helping managers identify changes that are required. Key learning points from 2017/18 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 services

If you have a problem with children's 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 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 services between 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2018.

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 2017 and 31 March 2018, children's services completed 21,035 contacts and received 5,871 referrals. This compares to 24,385 and 5,433 in 2016/17. As of 31 March 2018, there were 3,623 referrals open to children's services, compared to 3,574 a year ago.

The total number of statutory and informal complaints received about children's services in 2017/18 was 179. That is, 156 statutory complaints, 12 corporate complaints and 11 informal complaints. The number of complaints under the statutory process continue to increase, up from 147 in 2016/17 and 133 in 2015/16.

21 complaints were made by 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 – 7 during 2017/18 compared to 15 in 2016/17 and 17 in 2015/16.

Two main themes could be identified as arising from the complaints by and on behalf of users in 2017/18: 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. It is not currently possible to distinguish between compliments from children and young people themselves, or carers, or staff.

## Feedback

### 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 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 (LGSCO). Complainants who contact the complaints team directly are encouraged to use the contact centre to ensure that their complaint can be processed efficiently.

As during 2016/17, the majority of complainants in 2017/18 chose to make a complaint via email or through the contact centre.

## Advocacy

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 21 complaints from children and young people themselves this year, which is an increase on last year (15). Work has taken place with Barnardo's advocacy service to ensure that more feedback is received from children and young people.

Since 1st 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 21 children and young people making complaints during the year, 7 used an advocate to support them in making their complaint. Since April 2006, the Council has commissioned Barnardo's to provide an advocacy service.

## Complaints

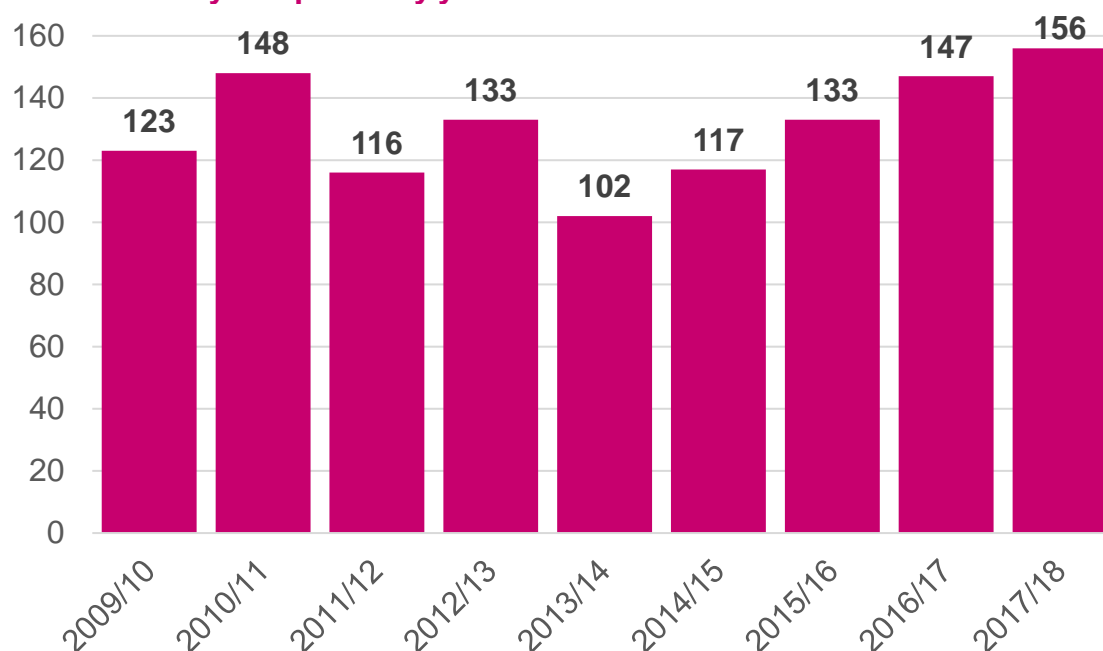
The table below indicates how many complaints were received, and how the complaint was received:

<b>Method</b>	<b>Number of complaints</b>
<i>Email</i>	83
<i>Form</i>	80
<i>Letter</i>	9
<i>Telephone</i>	5
<i>Not known</i>	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>179</b>

156 statutory complaints, were received about children's services in 2017/18. This compares to 147 statutory complaints in 2016/17. In addition, we received 12 corporate and 11 informal complaints.

## Annual comparison

### Formal statutory complaints by year



Listening to service users' complaints helps services improve by helping managers identify changes that are required. The statutory procedures offer a three-stage process, and the corporate procedures offer a two-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 2017/18 by resolution:

### Formal statutory complaints by upheld status

Status	Number of complaints	%
Upheld	16	10.5%
Partly upheld	66	42.5%
Not upheld	63	40%
Complaint withdrawn by complainant	10	6%
Open	1	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	

### Formal statutory complaints by team

Team	Complaints
Referral and assessment service	21
South neighbourhood	19
Looked after children / looked after children permanency	18
Fostering & adoption	13
Team South	10
ThroughCare	10
Team west	9
North west neighbourhood	7
Team east	7
Route 21	7
Team central	6
Multi-agency safeguarding hub / responsive services	6
Children's disability team	5
North east neighbourhood	4



<b>Team</b>	<b>Complaints</b>
Area team Willenhall	4
Safeguarding	3
Commissioning	2
Area team Radford	1
Area team Gosford	1
Area team Hillfields	1
Unknown	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>

## 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 and forwarded to the relevant service area for consideration and action.

No comments were recorded in 2017/18.

## 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.

64 compliments were received in the year.

The majority of compliments reflected satisfaction about the standard of practice in social work; and 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.

It is not currently possible to distinguish between compliments from children and young people themselves, or carers, or staff without manually going through every compliment. Below is a selection of compliments from children/young people and parents/carers:

Thank you for all that you have done for our family, you've helped in many ways.

She brings shine to every day and sparkles like a star.

Thank you for supporting me and my mum!

Thank you for your support and your kindness. We as a family appreciate your efforts!

Thank you doesn't seem enough for what you have done for me and my mum.

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.

I appreciate everything you have done for me man, you have thought so much to get me out man!

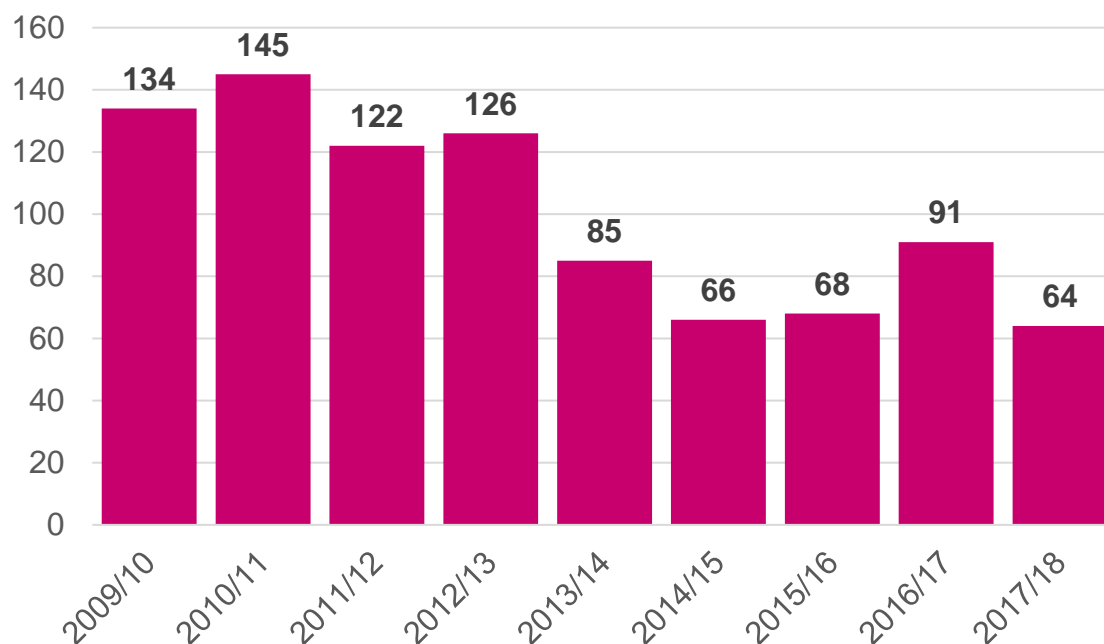
She is the best social worker ever because she does everything to keep me safe and happy and if she is free then she is always there for me and comes and talk to me when I'm at school and home.

Thank you for giving me some sanity!!!

I love [social worker] so much. She is lovely and so nice and so beautiful.

## Annual comparison

### Compliments recorded by year



## Resolution of complaints

### 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 156 complaints, of which 153 were resolved at Stage 1. That is, 98% of complaints were resolved at Stage 1 of the complaints process, this is a slight decrease from the percentage of 99% during 2016/17. More emphasis on local resolution has been introduced this year, due to the restructure of children's services, helping to keep the percentage resolved at stage one of the process at a high level.

### 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 2017/18, there were 3 investigations carried out at Stage 2, compared with one in 2016/17. At the time of reporting, all complaints have been successfully resolved at Stage 2.

These investigations were 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.

There were no complaints considered for review at Stage 3 during 2017/18.

## Timescales

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

Stage	Statutory complaints	Corporate complaints
1	10 working days (can be extended to 20 working days)	10 working days
2	25 working days (can be extended to 65 working days)	20 working days
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.

### Statutory complaints by stage and timescales in 2017/18

Stage	Timescales	Number of complaints
1	Within 10 working days	67
	Over 10 working days	86
2	Within 25 working days	0
	Over 25 working days	3
3	Within 30 working days	0
	Over 30 working days	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>156</b>

### Average timescales by stage in calendar days

Stage	Number of complaints	Average timescales
1	153	15.79
2	3	124.66
3	0	N/A

The average time in days to complete Stage 1 complaints was 15.79 working days in 2017/18, compared to 15 days in 2016/17. Adherence to timescales had previously been a challenge; weekly meetings with senior managers have ensured that complaint timescales were mostly maintained despite an increase in the number of complaints.

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 timescales, 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 124.66 working days in 2017/18 compared to 109 working days in 2016/17.



# 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 (LGSCO).

In 2017/18, the LGSCO received 29 complaints or enquiries relating to the category of education and children's services for Coventry City Council. The LGSCO does not separate education and children's services and do not necessarily inform the local authority of every complaint or enquiry received, so it is unclear how many of these related specifically to children's services.

The LGSCO undertook full investigations for three children's services complaints (and one education complaint). It upheld all three children's services and the one education complaint it investigated.

## Identified issues and resolutions

### Complaints by category in 2017/18

Category	Complaints
Poor communication	206
Standards of service	76
Child protection issues	9
Finance	4
Standard of environment	4
Staff conduct	3

### Compliments by category in 2017/18

Category	Compliments
Standard of practice (social work)	26
Standards of service	15
Good partnership working	10
Good child focus	10
Good communication	3

Note: compliments and complaints may be about more than one category so the total does not add up to the total number of complaints.

## 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 often achieves a positive resolution in many cases, which in turn decreases complaint escalation.

## Compensation

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 2017/18:

<b>Detail</b>	<b>Amount</b>
<i>Fostering fees</i>	£24,478.48
<i>Allowances</i>	£5,194.16
<i>Reimbursement of savings</i>	£896.10
<i>Funding for course</i>	£300.00
<i>Compensation following LGSCO investigation</i>	£100.00
<i>Cost of passport</i>	£58.50
<b>Total</b>	<b>£31,027.24</b>

## **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 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), 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 2016/17 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. This is currently being refreshed and a new leaflet is to be issued.

### **Information hub for social services**

A new information hub is to be launched to provide complaint information and processes to members of management and staff within Social Care to support the investigation and complaints process.

### **Further revision of the Stage 1 process**

The appointment of a full time complaints officer enabled all Stage 1 complaints to be monitored and managed more effectively. For the first three quarters of 2017/2018 year the average time in days to complete Stage 1 complaints was 16.52 working days, compared to 12.94 working days in quarter 4. Further work has continued in 2017/18 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.

### **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.

### **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 a slight increase in the average time in days to complete Stage 1 complaints (from 15 working days to 15.79 working days). In 2018/19 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 2017/18 with the average time in days to completion being 124.66 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 2016/2017 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**

### **Team Central**

For central there are 3 main area of learning and development to focus on as follows:

- Communication – Delays in responding and availability of allocated worker has been identified. Staff have been reminded to respond to communications within one day. Mobile numbers have been added to all social worker e-mails to ensure alternative methods of contact are available and finally admin staff now redirect customers to the duty person and or manager when necessary.
- Data breach – All staff have now undertaken their data protection training and have been reminded of the importance of proof reading all documents before sending out to families or professionals. Lock print is also utilised to avoid papers being inadvertently joined with others that may be lying uncollected on the printer.
- Distributing plans – All staff have been reminded to distribute care plans and minutes to families in a timely way so they are clear what is expected of them.

### **Looked after children (LAC) and permanency**

In the looked after children service, themes identified are around finances, insensitive communication, quality and timeliness of Life Story Work and family time/contact. This highlights a need for improvement around communication, consistency in social worker, 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 open communication channels to ensure that all involved, including children, young people and their parents are consistently kept informed and included. This includes ensuring that children are prepared for transitions through life story work that is to a high standard and that children's time with their birth families is prioritised.

Having reviewed the complaints, both birth parents, adopters and foster carers have on a number of occasions complained that social worker communication with them were "insensitive". Social workers need to be mindful of how comments within an assessments, emails and during discussions can be perceived as being insensitive. Wider work is being implemented, including training to develop and improve the skills of the workforce and to ultimately provide a consistently good service.

There is also a need for greater transparency and consistency in regards to financial decision making. Clear financial policies regarding allowances available to adopters/carers should be available online and sent to anyone whom has requested financial assistance so that everyone, including managers, social workers and adopters/carers, are clear about how decisions are made generally. Additionally, outcome letters should be sent out and held on file to evidence what decisions have been made for their family specifically and what they can expect in the future.

### **Safeguarding**

The Quality Assurance Service will be improving their method of gaining feedback about Child Protection Conferences and LAC Reviews. With the rolling out of the signs of safety methodology it is vital that the Service understands young people and families' experience of the meeting they attend/are the subject of. Up to now this has been by a feedback form but this may not be the most effective/accurate method. A technological based solution may be the way forward.

The Service needs to be more explicit about how a complaint can be made and under what circumstances. This can be both in writing and verbally. The Service needs to be sensitive when allocating an Independent Reviewing Officer as there may be reasons why a particular person is more/less suitable than another. This is especially when the young person's Child Protection Plan ends because that have become looked after.

There will also be an introductory letter to the young person explaining who their independent reviewing officer is with their role explained and a pen picture/photograph. There will also be a drive to improve access to advocacy for both looked after children and those in need of protection.

### **Team East**

In the East including Children with Disabilities service, on review of the complaints received, a number of the complaints were partially upheld and many of which related to parents/carers being dissatisfied with communication from the service and dissatisfaction of the service they received. To ensure learning from this and to close the loop, practitioners have recently been reflecting on Relationship Based Practice at a recent Practice Improvement Session. Managers during 1-2-1 with practitioners will continue to explore relationships to ensure we deliver a high standard service and our communication with families improves.

### **Team South**

The complaints that were upheld or partly upheld mainly relate to: lack of contact with or from Social Workers; delay in referrals being made to other service or commissioned providers; not following processes properly for involving parents in child protection conferences; and data protection.

In the South area we have been embedding the Signs Of Safety approach and focussing on the importance of involving family as partners in safety planning and relationship based practice. We have also been working on making sure that our interventions are purposeful and, we have been completing training to ensure that we understand the Data protection requirements. We have started to seek parents' feedback so that we can get a better sense of whether the interventions we provide are helpful and learn more about what we do well and what we need to improve.

## Multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and responsive services

Staff have been reminded that some parents find social care involvement difficult, and we must hold this in mind when working with parents

MASH staff have been reminded that during these conversations parent's views should be reflected back to them to give them an opportunity to really hear what they have actually said and to ensure we have captured their views accurately. Staff have been reminded that in many situations, parents have not always felt empowered to take steps to change without support to do so and we are there to help and support. On learning from some of the complaints the MASH initial triage team is now manned by qualified Social Workers who are trained to manage difficult conversations in a transparent and respectful manner. Staff have also been reminded to be aware of the tone of their voice when speaking to both parents and professionals. As a Local Authority we are embedding Signs of Safety which enables workers to ensure families' voice is better included.

## ThroughCare

The majority of complaints to Route 21/ Through Care this year have been in 3 main areas; issues around tasks not being completed by previous social workers, concerns around placements and issues around finances and entitlements. In response tasks not being completed a new transfer checklist is now in place and regular transfer meetings are happening between team managers to ensure when cases transfer there is clarity around outstanding tasks. The issues around Placements are feeding into a wider piece of work about the quality of placements available for LAC and care leavers. In terms of issues around finances and entitlements updated training has been given to all staff following the redesign and we will be publishing this information in multiple formats as part of the Local Offer at the end of the year.

## Fostering

A number of complaints related to special guardianship support and in particular financial support to special guardians. As a result of learning from this, we have drawn up a leaflet to provide to all connected persons applicants to clarify support arrangements, updated our pathways to care policy and updated our policy on special guardianship support to ensure that areas of uncertainty are clarified.

There was a complaint about use of words in assessment which has been considered alongside wider developmental work in assessment practice.

## Learning from complaints overall

Our teams take complaints very serious and we continue to use these to inform our practice throughout Children's Services. We have monthly Practice Improvement Forums, where all Children Services Practitioners come together to consider learning and development and this includes feedback and learning from complaints and audits, this enables us to continuously reflect on the service we provide and improve. We have the same forums each month for managers, to ensure the same learning is applied.

We will continue to develop these forums and continue to learn from all feedback from children, young people, parents, carers, families and professionals, to ensure the service we deliver continues to be improved.

Ilius Ahmed, Complaints Officer &  
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Coventry City Council  
September 2018