



CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK:

**COMPLAINTS
COMPLIMENTS**

**ANNUAL REPORT
1 April 2014 – 31 March 2015**

INTRODUCTION

This report fulfills the statutory duty to monitor the effectiveness of the complaints procedure and produce an annual report for Children's Services Social Care complaints. The report will be presented to staff, the relevant local authority committee and will be made available on the Council's website.

The report provides statistics for 2014/15 on the number of complaints received including those considered by the Local Government Ombudsman; which customer groups made complaints including some analysis of statistical diversity data; complaint outcomes (upheld/not upheld); performance; and learning and improvements resulting from complaints.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children's Services Complaints Procedure

The effectiveness of the complaints procedure is regularly monitored. Status reports are reviewed by senior managers to support timely resolution. Quarterly reports, on the number of complaints received, outcomes, learning and service improvements that result from complaints, are also reviewed by the senior management team. The Learning & Development Manager also reviews the reports to embed the learning from complaints into training for social workers.

The procedure has three stages:

- Stage 1, Local resolution by manager – 10 working days, up to 20 for complex cases.
- Stage 2, Investigation by someone outside of the service area complained about – 25 working days, up to 65 working days.
- Stage 3, Independent Review – panel to be set up in 30 working days
- Alternative Dispute Resolution - offered as an alternative to the complaints procedure. Conciliation meetings are used to resolve complaints without the need for protracted investigations. A complainant can opt back into the complaints process at any time.

If customers remain dissatisfied with the Council's handling of the complaint they can refer to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO), which is an independent body that can consider complaints about the Council.

Effectiveness of the Complaints Procedure

There were 92 new complaints received for the period 1 April 2014 – 31 March 2015 compared to 104 reported in 2013/14. Six complaints were raised by children. The service area providing services to Looked After Children and Care Leavers received the most complaints.

98 stage 1 complaints were concluded. Of those that received a response 76 (78%) were done within 20 working days or less. Not all cases were resolved after the initial response. Conciliation meetings were held in eight cases following the initial response to remedy complaints. The table in Section 2.2 sets out reasons cases took longer than 20 days to conclude.

None of the new cases progressed to stage 2. One case received the previous year progressed to stage 2.

The Local Government Ombudsman considered seven cases that had been investigated through the Council's own complaints procedure. In three cases the LGO agreed with the

Council's finding of fault. In three cases financial remedies were agreed to settle the complaints. £250, £500 and £900 was paid.

Complaints were seen as important feedback and a means of identifying how practices may be changed for the better. Services were receptive to customers' views and complaints, with 70% of complaints either upheld fully or in part. Whilst individual cases had specific remedies put in place, wider services improvements were also identified in a number of cases.

There were also 31 formal compliments recorded compared to 28 the previous year.

Effectiveness

The activity in the period shows that the complaints procedure has generally been effective at resolving customer complaints at a local level. The customer experience in complaints has led to some improvements to practices. There are improved links to the Council's Children's Services Academy of Social Work and Early Intervention Service to share learning from complaints. This has resulted in targeted training, details are in Section 4. However, there is still room for improvement in understanding the root cause for complaints at the local level to fully identify learning opportunities. Customer Relations will support services in the coming year to improve in this area.

1 SUMMARY STATISTICS

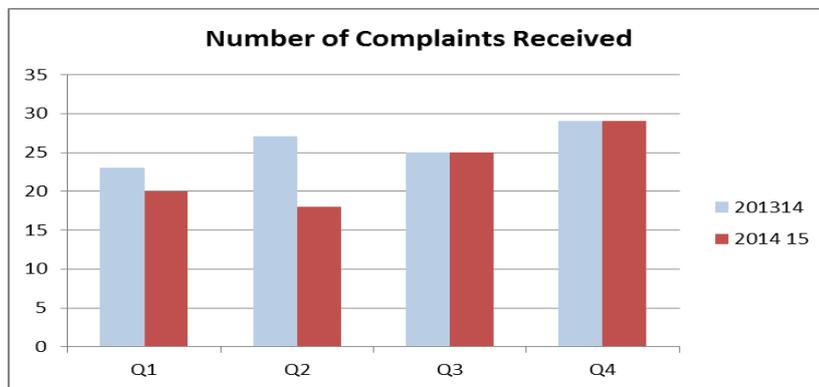
1.1 Customer Feedback Received - Compliments

1.1.1 31 compliments were recorded across social care services relating to good customer care and the quality of support to children and families.

Service users, including young people, thanked workers for help and support and professionalism including; listening & sensitivity; hard work; good communication; helpful guidance, and thoughtfulness. External professionals commended the contribution to multi-agency working; thoroughness and professionalism.

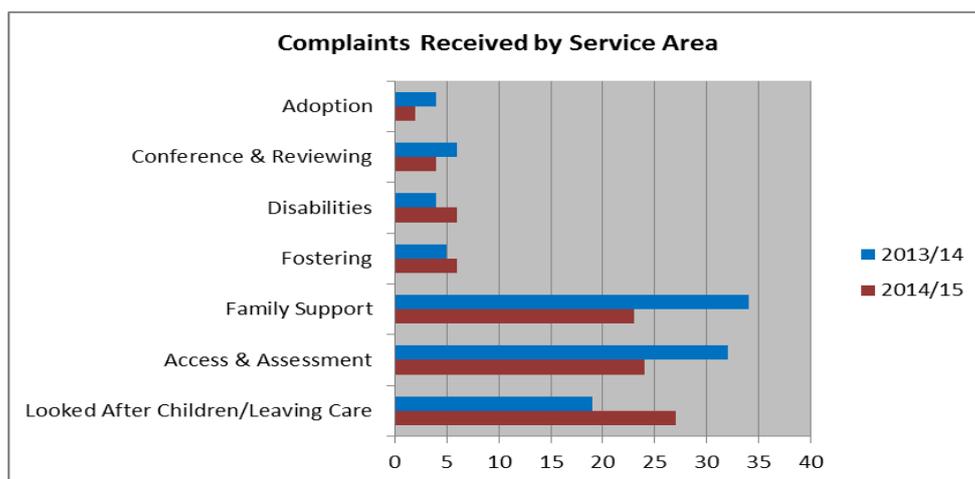
1.2 Customer Feedback Received - Complaints

1.2.1 In 2014/15 there were 3443 records of children loaded for Children's Social Care Services. There were 92 new complaints received, 6 from children and young people. Last year 104 new complaints were recorded.



1.2.2 Compared to last year there was an overall drop in the number of complaints received. There were fewer complaints in the first half of the year. The same number of complaints was received in the last two quarters.

1.3 Trends - Services Most Complained About



1.3.1 The services for Looked After Children & Care Leavers were the areas most complained about, and saw the most significant rise in complaints compared to last year. The service received 27 new complaints compared to 19 recorded the previous year. The three top reasons for complaint were; concerns about care placements; case handling issues; and delay providing services.

- 1.3.2 The managers of the Corporate Parenting Service, which includes the Looked After Children & Care Leavers services, engaged in a programme of improving complaints practice. This included a refresh on the value of complaints and resolution, to improve practice around recognising when concerns should be addressed as complaints. This has led to an increase in complaints being recognised and registered. Further work will be carried out to support the service to consider the root cause for complaints to inform practice improvements.

The Customer Relations Manager has met with the Children in Care Council to hear their experience of complaints and to consider how we can improve the access to raising complaints and feeling heard. Peer mentors then carried out a short survey which revealed that not all those who took part knew they could make a complaint or how to make a complaint. Information on how to complain and a freepost form are included in the packs for looked after children. Customer Relations provided information for the Foster Carers Talk Time newsletter to promote the message of ensuring professionals and carers involved in the care of children empower children to speak up when they face problems. Customer Relations will continue to work with the Corporate Parenting service to promote good access to complaints for children and good practice.

- 1.3.3 One of the six young people who raised their own complaints withdrew the complaint. The five remaining were about the experience of being looked after. Complaints were about;

- ~ not feeling listened to about planned changes;
- ~ not feeling that their needs were understood;
- ~ letter not responded to;
- ~ not feeling supported whilst in care and when moved to independence

Children who are looked after have the opportunity to provide feedback on the service through their regular reviews and are reminded of their right to complain. The annual report on Independent Reviewing Officers activity includes examples of challenges to Care Plans made on behalf of children in care by their reviewing officer. A formal dispute escalation process is now in place. Reviewing Officer also met with looked after children as part of a consultation process on how looked after children reviews work. Children's main wish was for reviews to be shorter and only attended by people who needed to be there. This has now been implemented reviews are kept smaller and briefer.

- 1.3.4 Both Assessment and Family Support Services saw a drop in complaints on the previous year. Customer Relations developed staff guidance on how to manage communications effectively when they become challenging to prevent issues escalating to complaints.
- 1.3.5 The three top reasons for complaint for Access & Assessment Services were; case handling issues; dissatisfaction with decisions and actions; and staff conduct. There were fewer complaints about the quality and accuracy of assessments which was one of the main reasons for complaint last year.
- 1.3.6 The main reasons for complaint for Family Support Services were; poor communication and customer care; case handling issues; staff conduct & attitude; and failure to provide action or support. Whilst the service still received complaints about customer care issues there were fewer complaints of communications not being responded to than last year.

1.4 Stage 2 & 3 Complaints

- 1.4.1 There was one complaint, involving two complainants that progressed to stage 2 during the period. Both individual's complaints were investigated separately. There were no stage 3 complaints.

1.5 Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) Complaints

- 1.5.1 The LGO referred 7 new cases to the Council, *three from one complainant. A total of £1650 was paid in complaints settlements.

Area	Issue	LGO Decision/Outcome
Intake & Assessment*	Used incorrect information in a report	Not to investigate further as Council had remedied the fault
Family Support*	Not reading case records so repeated the error above. Council considered the complaint and found fault.	Recommended Council pay £250 for avoidable distress. Service to remind staff to read case records.
Family Support*	Unhappy with actions taken to assess risks 10 years previously	Not to investigate, out of time.
Fostering	The way a social worker spoke to the complainant, and how the Council responded to a subsequent complaint.	Not to investigate. Unlikely to be able to add anything to the investigation the Council had carried out.
Adoption	Approval process for prospective adopters	Not to investigate. A review process was better placed to consider the matter
Looked After Children	Decisions around contact made through a court process	Complaint outside of the LGO jurisdiction.
Looked After Children	Poor communication regarding social work interventions and failing to clarify the complaints procedure.	The Council had identified the fault and for the most part remedied it with an offer to pay £780. The LGO recommended the Council pay £900 to remedy the avoidable distress caused.

- 1.5.2 The LGO also made decisions on 2 cases that had been raised in the previous reporting year:

The Council did not answer complaints about a case that had included legal proceedings. This was because the Council was suggesting that to provide the answers sought might prejudice the proceedings. The Ombudsman felt there were some answers that could be provided without prejudicing the legal proceedings. Answers on matters not related directly to the proceedings were provided. The learning was shared and practice was reviewed to improve the handling of similar complaints in the future.

In another case the Ombudsman felt there was fault in the way the Council had made its decision to move a family due to assessed risks. The Council had taken advice at the time it had made the decision accepted the objective decision of the Ombudsman as reasonable. £500 was paid to remedy the distress to the family.

1.6 Alternative Dispute Resolution

- 1.6.1 Customer Relations offered alternative dispute resolution to those who requested independent investigation of their complaints. Conciliation meetings are more likely to rebuild confidence and improve communications between the complainant and service. There are also significant cost savings by remedying cases without the need for externally commissioned investigators.

Seven complainants took up the offer of conciliation in the period which led to the cases being actioned without escalation to the next stage. One complainant did go on to raise the complaint with the Local Government Ombudsman who declined to investigate. Conciliation helped complainants to feel heard, and resulted in better outcomes for complainants by resolving complaints through face to face discussion.

1.7 Outcomes from Concluded Complaints

1.7.1 98 Stage 1 complaints were concluded in the period.

14 stage 1 cases were upheld. A further 55 were upheld in part. This meant a total of 69 (70%) investigated stage 1 complaints highlighted faults in full or in part.

1.7.2 Of the concluded complaints:

32 cases involved the Access & Assessment Services, 20 (62%) of the complaints had an upheld or partly upheld outcome.

25 involved the Looked After and Leaving Care Services and 19 (76%) of the complaints had an upheld or partly upheld outcome.

19 cases involved the Family Support Services. 11 (57%) of the complaints had an upheld or partly upheld outcome.

1.7.3 Three stage 2 complaints concluded in the period and all were partly upheld.

1.7.4 Remedies were put in place for individual complaint cases. Section 4 details the wider learning and improvements from complaints.

1.7.5 The majority of complaints were resolved through an apology and/or by putting right mistakes, for example correcting a report or putting in a service. Financial remedies are sometimes paid where a mistake has directly led to some injustice and there is no other remedy available. The LGO guidance says that injustice regarding distress generally cannot be remedied by way of a payment, so payment amounts are symbolic to acknowledge the impact. In the period the LGO recommended financial remedies in three cases to recognise avoidable distress. Whilst benchmarking data is not available for all similar sized authorities where there is data available the total paid out in the same period on financial remedies has ranged from nil to £34,000.

2 PERFORMANCE IN COMPLAINTS HANDLING

2.1 The procedure allows for 10 working days for completion of a stage 1 complaint, up to 20 working days if the complaint is complex.

2.2 98 stage 1 cases were dealt with. 76 (78%) received an initial response within 20 working days or less, resolving 63 cases. The table below shows reasons cases took longer than 20 days to conclude:

Timescale for Sending Stage 1 Complaint Responses:			
Working Days	0 - 10	11-20	20+
Stage 1 resolved	34	29	
Initial response sent on time, followed by conciliation to resolve dissatisfaction			7
Initial response sent on time, followed by further work to clarify and resolve the complaint			6
Information added to original complaint, more time needed to assess and respond			2
Complainant agreed to an extension to the response time			2
Delayed due to the need to also follow another process to get a complaint outcome			2
Delayed due to key member of staff not being available			1
Delayed due to the need to seek consent for a representative to raise the complaint on the service user's behalf			1
Service delayed the response			14

3 EQUALITY & DIVERSITY MONITORING

3.1 Monitoring

3.1.1 Where we are able to capture data on the characteristics of service users we can; monitor access to the complaints procedure; ensure services are appropriate for all service user groups; check whether any issues relating to discrimination have been raised. Customer Relations record data provided about the **service user** for complaints.

For complaints the service user can be a parent who is engaged with social care services where the complaint issue relates to their direct involvement with a service. A person may make more than one complaint in the period.

3.1.2 In 2014-15 there were 3443 child records in Children's Social Care Services. During the period 92 new complaints were registered.

3.1.3 There are 'unknowns' in the returns for complaints as data is collected at the first point of contact in a complaint. 78% of cases were received via letters and emails which did not generally contain monitoring data information. In the absence of any data the record in the complaint database is 'unknown'. Unknowns may mask representations from minority groups.

3.2 Accessibility to Complaints

3.2.1 Receipt Method for Complaints

The Council aims to meet the needs of its service users in accessing the complaints procedure by having a range of contact options for making complaints. People can make complaints in person; face to face or via telephone (including a direct line to Customer Relations), in writing; via email, letter, or complaint form. A complaint form specifically designed for young people is also available.

The 92 complaints received were by the following methods:

56% by email	12 % by telephone	2 % personal visit
22% by letter	8 % by complaint form	

3.2.2 Young People

Children's Services Social Care delivers services to address the needs of children and young people. The majority of the 92 complaints made about the service were from adults complaining about their interactions and experience.

Young people can have the support of an advocate to make complaints. Six young people raised complaints in their own right about issues affecting them; one did not proceed with the complaint. Five of the complaints were received on email via an advocate. One complaint was raised by a family representative via email.

3.3 **Gender**

3.3.1 In order to make some broad comparisons, data gathered for new complaint cases received in 2014/15 has been considered alongside the provisional data on the gender of people who were referred to children's social care throughout the year.

3.3.2 For complaints we recorded the gender of the child in most cases. Where a complaint is made by an adult about their own experience of intervention the adult's gender was recorded. This gives us the gender of complainants affected by complaints.

Gender	Male	Female	Not known
Service user affected by complaints	33	49	10
Gender in Children's Records loaded by the social care service	1737	1640	66

3.3.3 Service users of both genders are represented in the complaints procedure. Where information was known in complaints, more females were affected by complaints than males. Fewer females accessed social care services than males.

3.3.4 There were some 'unknowns' for the service receiving the highest number of complaints (Looked After Children/Care Leavers). Issues of complaint affected 20 female service users compared to 5 males. The issues affecting males also affected females.

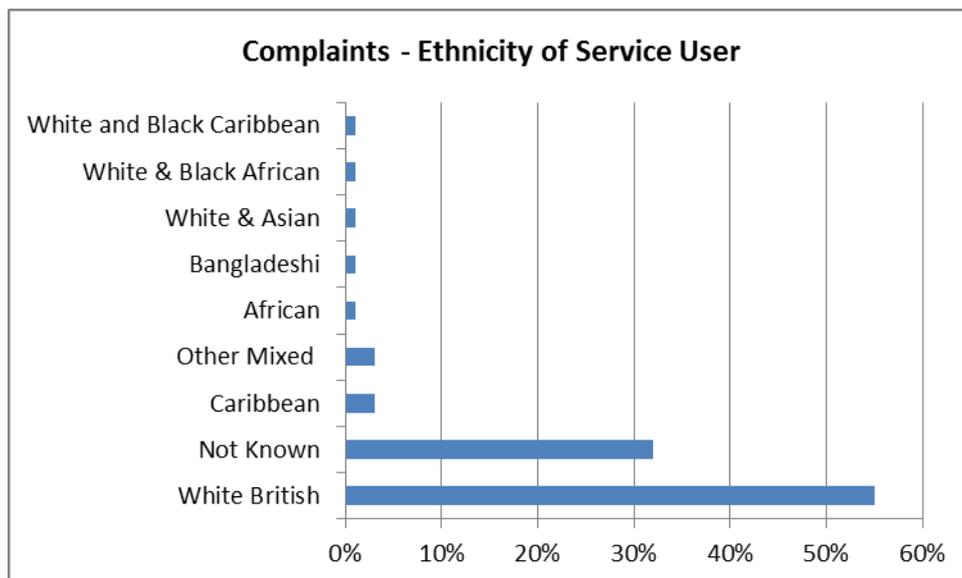
3.3.5 Broadly, both genders were affected by similar issues.

3.4 **Ethnicity**

3.4.1 The last census on population by ethnic origin (2011) showed that 89.7% of the population of Central Bedfordshire were 'White British' and 10.3% classified as 'Other'. 80% of the records loaded for social care services were 'White'.

3.4.2 In 32% of complaints the ethnicity of the complainant was recorded as not known. Where information was recorded 55% of service users affected by new complaints were recorded as 'White British'.

3.4.3 People with a minority ethnic background were also represented in complaints, with 13% of service users classified with an ethnic origin other than 'White British'. The issues affecting service users with minority backgrounds were wide ranging and were also raised by those with a White British background with no difference in themes.



3.5 Age

3.5.1 Of the 92 complaints received;

- 77 affected people under the age of 18
- 2 affected people 19 – 64
- 8 cases age unknown
- 5 no service user was identified

3.5.2 The majority of complaints affected children and young people but were made by adults and crossed all services. The main reasons for complaint are set out in Section 1.3.

3.5.3 Five young people pursued their own complaints which related to a range of services. Complaints were about; not feeling listened to or understood (3); not providing practical support in planning for the future and deductions from independent living payments. Young people making their complaints were supported by an advocate.

3.6 Disability

3.6.1 The majority of complaints were recorded as 'not known' or 'no' in relation to disability of the service user.

3.6.2 There were six complaints related to children with disabilities services. There were similarities in some issues of complaint from parents of children who had a disability to those with no disability. Similarities were; dissatisfaction with the approach to an assessment; poor communication; being excluded from a meeting; inaccuracies in reports/minutes; obstructive ways of working.

Other areas of complaint specific to the children with disabilities services were; resource decision makers not taking the full circumstances into account; inconsistencies in care staff.

4 SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS RESULTING FROM CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

- 4.1 Where a service identified a fault from a complaint (upheld/partly upheld), case specific remedies were put in place.

The Council's Children's Services Academy of Social Work and Early Intervention Service links with Customer Relations to review the learning identified from complaints to support improvements to practice through training. In this period there has been a focus on; assessment training and associated resources for social workers; specialist Special Guardianship Order training; and the programme for ASYE¹ is central to trying to increase the numbers of permanent children's social workers.

Managers also considered what they could do to improve the service generally. Examples of actions taken are set out below:

4.2 Family Support Services	
YOU SAID	THE SERVICE DID:
A report did not make it clear that information was an allegation rather than a fact.	Reinforced to all officers the importance of reading case records properly so that entries are accurate.
4.3 Access & Assessment	
YOU SAID	THE SERVICE DID:
Incorrect information in assessments. Failure to correct information in report.	The system now has a facility to allow managers to correct factual accuracy in concluded electronic reports. Future assessment training will stress the importance of correct information and issues around failure to address incorrect information
Parents disagreeing with the views in an assessment were told views would be added. This was not correct.	A process has been agreed and in place for addressing complaints that allows opposing views on electronic assessments to be noted in the assessment.
An appointment with a young person was missed	Introduction of a weekly tracking sheet to help workers in identifying work progress and ensuring visits are not missed in the future
Failure to share outcome of assessment with family before court proceedings	Training completed with the team advising social workers of the importance of sharing assessments in person with families
Did not answer questions where some of the complaint matters directly related to court proceedings.	Practice was reviewed and changed. Cases are assessed by managers so that enquiries and complaints that clearly sit outside of any court proceedings are answered.
Miscommunication relating to rent payments for Crashpad.	Workers were reminded to respond appropriately.
No complaint form provided on request	Staff were advised they are expected to send out forms within 2 working days

¹ Assessed and Supported Year in Employment

4.4 Conference & Review Services	
YOU SAID	THE SERVICE DID:
Covering letter to family member sent with consultation document did not include a return date.	The template letter was revised to include a return date for consultation documents so parents are clear.

4.5 Looked After Children & Leaving Care Services	
YOU SAID	THE SERVICE DID:
Family involved in Special Guardianship Order were not fully informed of the process regarding reports and what would be shared, when, and with whom.	Training provided to include the report process and information sharing.
High turnover of staff led to changes in social worker for a child which impacted on the stability of the placement.	The service actively recruited permanent staff & the number of permanent social workers increased significantly A comprehensive programme is in place to support and train newly qualified social workers in this team.
Plans to hold a meeting not followed up	If a meeting, for what ever reason, has to be cancelled social workers are to inform parents and professionals as a matter of priority, by phone. A letter then needs to be sent formally apologising for the cancellation and, as appropriate, outlining the reasons for this and confirming an alternative date for the meeting.
Confusion over the status of a joint assessment	If a joint piece of work is being carried out parents will be advised of the role of each professional. A letter confirming the purpose of the assessment, how this is to be undertaken, and the roles of each professional involved are to be sent.
Errors in life story book work for a child.	Staff are encouraged to make contact with family members when writing life story books to ensure the information is accurate.
Delay providing access to records	Training was provided to staff on subject access procedures

4.6 Children with Disabilities Services	
YOU SAID	THE SERVICE DID:
Complaint about not consulting with parents in relation to the commissioning of care agencies and the accountability of those agencies when care is withdrawn	Aim to meet with the Special Needs Action Panel to clarify roles and responsibilities so that the protocol is clearer for parents. Also aim to meet with the care agencies that we commission to address the issue of accountability and enable them to understand the impact of decision making on families in providing and withdrawing support
Information not recorded on the case file and not available when the case transferred to a new worker.	The issues were shared with the team with an expectation that case transfers will be completed seamlessly and all information recorded on the file.