



Children's Social Care Annual Complaints and Compliments Report for 2023-2024

1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. Sutton Council welcomes all feedback and aims to learn from it, as it helps to solve problems, adapt and improve services. The Council monitors and uses the information gained to help improve the quality of services and relations with residents.
- 1.2. The Council treats all complaints seriously and ensures that any concerns and issues raised by customers or their representatives are properly investigated in an unbiased, non-judgemental, transparent, timely and appropriate manner. The outcome of any investigation along with any resulting actions will be explained to the complainant and the Council will take appropriate action to learn from any lessons that arise.
- 1.3. The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the complaints received regarding children's social services. This helps us to understand trends and themes and use this information to drive learning and improvement. This report is written in accordance with The Children Act 1989 Complaints Procedure and covers the four quarters below:
 - Q1 - 1 April 2023 to 30 June 2023;
 - Q2 - 1 July 2023 to 30 September 2023;
 - Q3 - 1 October 2023 to 31 December 2023; and
 - Q4 - 1 January 2024 to 31 March 2024.
- 1.4. The Council has a duty to ensure that any individual, or their representative who has a complaint about the children's social care service has access to the appropriate procedure. The Council's Customer Care team, the team that processes complaints, is part of the wider Customer Experience service which sits within the Resources Directorate. There is a statutory requirement to have a Complaints Manager in post, this role is filled by the Customer Care Manager. Within the Customer Care team, there is one Customer Experience Lead and two Customer Service Advisers.
- 1.5. The Customer Care team is an important corporate function which supports the organisation and ensures effective and efficient complaint handling procedures are in place. The Customer Care team also provides advice and guidance to council officers on best practices and ensures that the learning from complaints is taken forward to improve service delivery.

2. Overview of the Complaints Procedure

- 2.1. Complaints are processed according to The Children Act 1989 Complaints Procedure. The procedure is a three stage process and if after completing the procedure the complainant remains dissatisfied, they can escalate their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.
- 2.2. **Stage 1 - Local Resolution:** At Stage 1, complaints are assigned to Service Managers to investigate the concerns being raised and provide a response to the complaint. It is our aim that the majority of complaints will be resolved at Stage 1 to the complainants satisfaction without the need for progressing to Stage 2. The time frame for responding to Stage 1 complaints is 10 working days. If we are unable to provide a complete response in this time, we can implement a further 10 working days extension. The maximum amount of time that Stage 1 should take is 20 working days.
- 2.3. **Stage 2 - Investigation and Adjudication:** If the complainant is dissatisfied with our response at Stage 1, they can request escalation of their complaint to Stage 2. At Stage 2, the Council will appoint an Independent Investigating Officer (IO) and Independent Person (IP) to conduct an investigation into the concerns being raised. The IO and IP will report on their findings and the Council will appoint an adjudicating officer, usually a Head of Service within Children's social care to respond to these findings. The time frame for responding at Stage 2 is 25 working days; however, this can be extended to 65 working days if the complaint is complex in nature. At Sutton, we commission external IO and IP officers to add an additional layer of independence and scrutiny.
- 2.4. **Stage 3 - Review Panel:** If the complainant is dissatisfied following Stage 2, they can request further consideration of their complaint at Stage 3, this must be done within 20 working days. A review panel is made up of three independent panel members, with one member being appointed the Chair of the panel, the IO and IP at Stage 2, the adjudicating officer at Stage 2, the Complaints Manager and the complainant. After hearing on the complaint, the panel will present their findings to the Director of Children's Service within 5 working days, who will then have 15 working days to respond to the panel's findings. The panel must take place within 30 working days of the complainant's request for a review panel.
- 2.5. A complaint may be generally defined as an expression of dissatisfaction or disquiet in relation to an individual child or young person, which requires a response.

2.6. A complaint can be made by the following:

- Any child or young person (or a parent/or someone who has parental responsibility for the child or young person) who is being looked after by the local authority or is not looked after by them but is in need;
- Any local authority foster carer (including those caring for children placed through independent fostering agencies);
- Children leaving care;
- Special guardians;
- A child or young person (or parent to them) to whom a Special Guardian order is in force;
- Any person who has applied for an assessment under section 14F(3) or (4);
- Any child or young person who may be adopted, their parents and guardians;
- Persons wishing to adopt a child;
- Any other person whom arrangements for the provision of adoption services extend;
- Adopted persons, their parents, natural parents and former guardians; and
- Such other person as the local authority considers has sufficient interest in the child or young person's welfare to warrant their representations being considered by them.

2.7. As per best practices recommended by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and The Children Act 1989 Complaints Procedure, complaints will generally be considered if they are made within 12 months of the matter they are complaining about. The Council can however use its discretion to investigate complaints out of this time period.

2.8. The Council's Customer Care team will review complaints upon receipt and decide if the complaint should be handled in line with the statutory complaints procedure. Those that are not dealt with using the statutory procedure, are handled using the Council's corporate complaints procedure. Generally, assessments and services in the following areas should be considered under the statutory procedure:

- Children in need;
- Looked after children;
- Special Guardianship support; and
- Post-adoption support.

2.9. The following assessments and services tend to be exempt from the statutory procedure and would be handled using the Council's corporate complaints procedure:

- Early Help;
- Child protection including S47 enquiries and conferences;
- Assessments of potential foster carers and adopters ;
- Foster carer registration; and
- Section 7 and Section 37 court reports.

2.10. More information on the Council's corporate complaints procedure can be found on our [website](#).

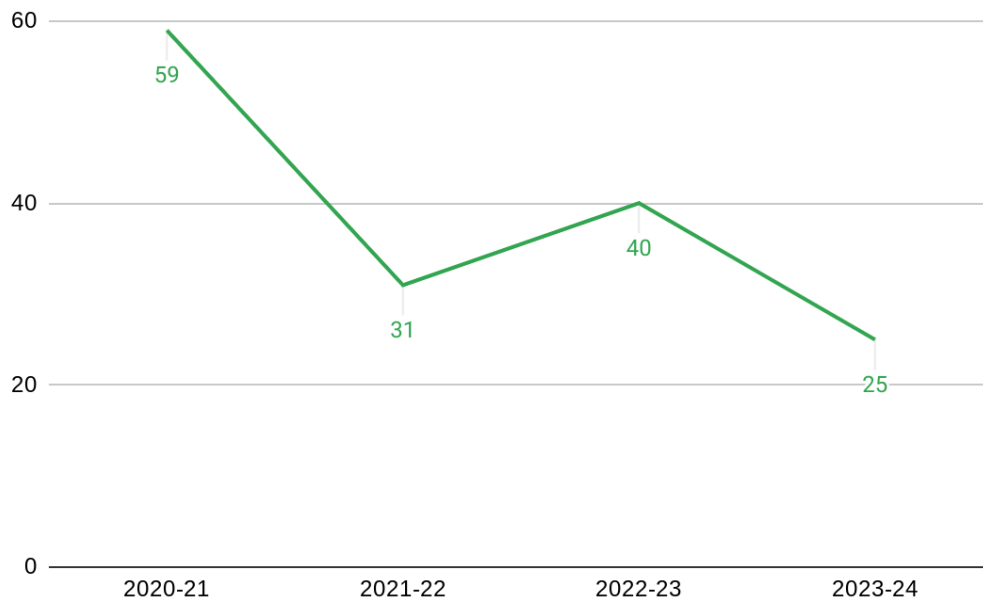
2.11. Complaints are counted for the year in which they were received, not responded to. This means that any complaints received within 2023-24, will be captured in this report.

3. Complaint Summary

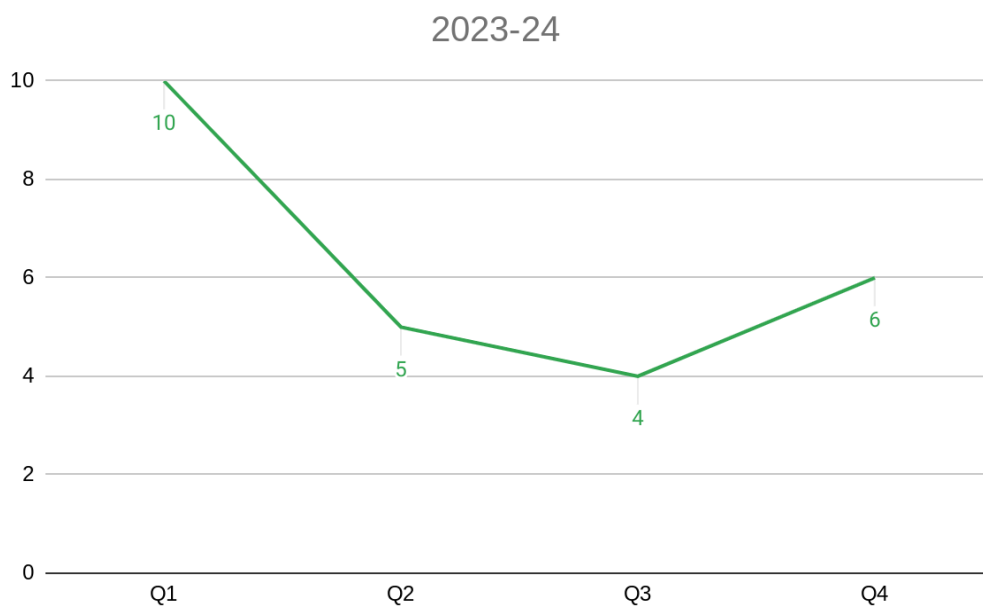
3.1. In 2023-24, the Council received 28 children's social care complaints. Three of which were withdrawn, therefore the Council responded to 25 complaints at Stage 1.

3.2. The complaints were for a range of services and for a range of reasons across children's social care. This report will provide a breakdown on which services received complaints, what the complaints were about and the performance (timeliness of responding to complaints).

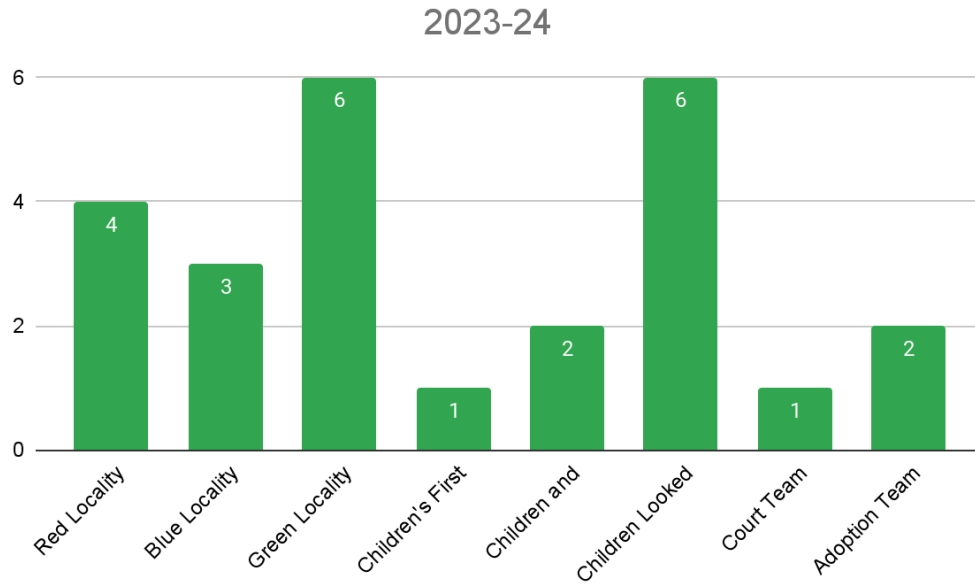
3.3. The graph below shows the number of complaints received at Stage 1 for the past four years. From 2021-22, the number of Stage 1 complaints has reduced significantly with a slight increase in 2022-23.



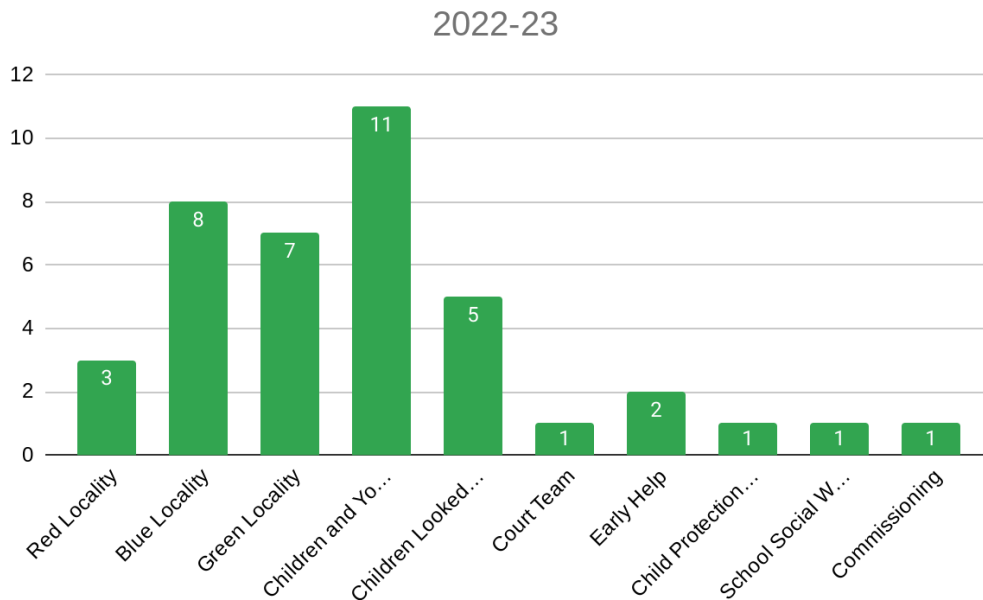
3.4. The graph below shows the number of Stage 1 complaints per quarter. The number of complaints was lowest in Q3 and highest in Q1.



3.5. The graph below shows the number of complaints received by service for 2023-24. The Green Locality, and Children Looked After and Leaving Care Team received the most complaints, with 6 out of 25 being investigated and responded to by each of them.



3.6. For comparison, the graph below shows the number of Stage 1 complaints received by service for 2022-23. The Children and Young People's Disability Service received the most complaints, with 11 out of 40 being investigated and responded to by them.



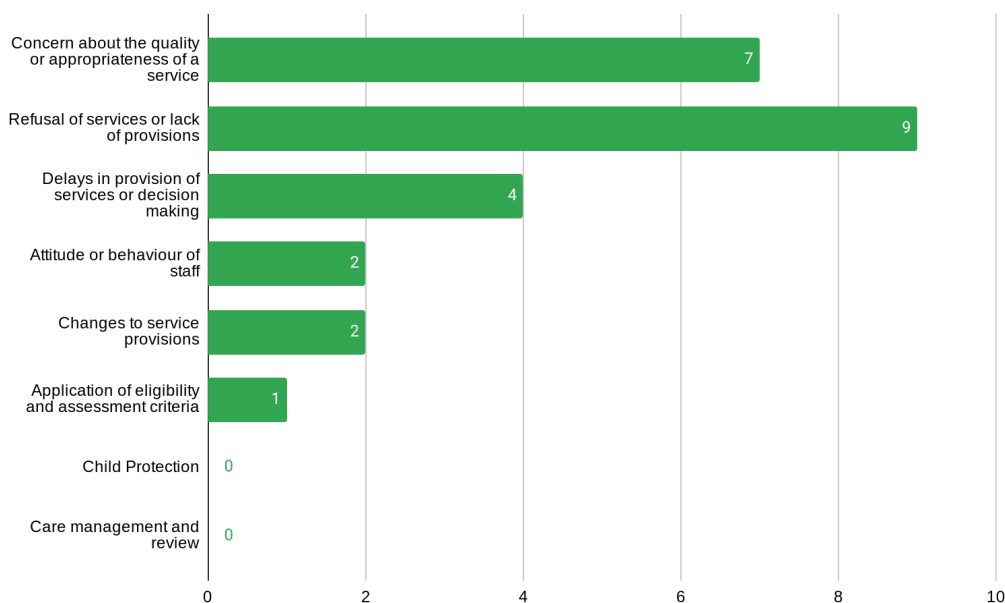
3.7. The table below shows the number of Stage 1 complaints received by service per quarter for 2023-24. Due to the low number of complaints and the spread across services, there is no distinguishable trend for complaints received per quarter.

Service	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
Red Locality	2	0	1	1	4
Blue Locality	1	0	1	1	3
Green Locality	3	0	1	2	6
Children's First Contact Service	1	0	0	0	1
Children and Young People's Disability Service	0	2	0	0	2
Children Looked After and Leaving Care Team	2	2	1	1	6
Court Team	0	0	0	1	1
Adoption Team	1	1	0	0	2
Total					25

- 3.8. Of the 25 Stage 1 complaints, we received six Stage 2 escalation requests, one of which was withdrawn, two are paused (at the time of writing) at the request of the complainants and three proceeded to investigation. During 2023-24, one Stage 3 Review Panel was held. As mentioned, the Council aims to resolve complaints at Stage 1 of the process to the complainant's satisfaction without the need for escalation. The low number of complaints escalated to Stage 2 and 3 demonstrates this is taking place.

4. Complaint Themes

- 4.1. We have eight themes for monitoring complaints. The graph below shows the themes and the number of Stage 1 complaints logged for each in the reporting period. The highest number of complaints received were related to refusal of services or lack of provisions.



4.2. Of the Stage 1 complaints that have been escalated to Stage 2 and proceeded to investigation, the themes of those complaints were:

- 1 - Concern about the quality or appropriateness of a service;
- 1 - Refusal of services or lack of provisions; and
- 1 - Delays in provision of services or decision making.

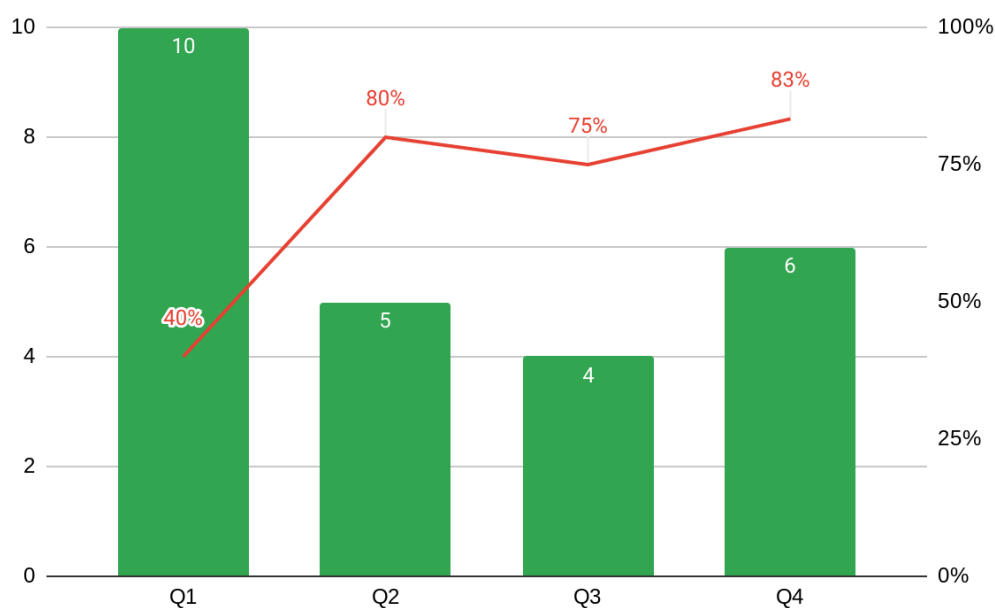
4.3. The Stage 3 Review Panel that was held during 2023-24 was regarding concerns about the quality or appropriateness of a service.

4.4. The Council has been recording complaint themes since the beginning of 2023-24, we do not have this data for previous years. Going forward, we will be able to offer insightful comparisons to previous years data with an aim to drive service improvement and delivery. The Customer Care team will be recording the theme of the complaint once it is received and assigned for investigation.

5. Complaint Performance

5.1. As mentioned above, the statutory complaints procedure provides up to 20 working days to investigate and respond to Stage 1 complaints.

5.2. The graph below shows the percentage of complaints responded to within the statutory time frames for Stage 1 complaints per quarter. Performance was highest in Q4 and lowest in Q1.



5.3. All Stage 2 complaints that have proceeded to investigation have been responded to within the statutory timeframes.

5.4. The Stage 3 complaint was responded to within statutory timeframes.

6. Corporate Complaints

6.1. This report provides a brief overview of those complaints received and handled using the Council's corporate complaints procedure. These complaints do not include those made about education concerns.

6.2. In 2023-24, the Council received 25 children's social care complaints that were handled as corporate complaints. Of those 25 complaints, four were escalated to Stage 2 of the corporate procedure. The complaints were for a range of services and for a range of reasons across children's social care.

6.3. The Red Locality responded to 7 out of the 25 complaints with the remaining teams all responding to relatively low numbers of complaints. The Children's First Contact Service, Court Team and Adoption Team received zero corporate complaints in 2023-24.

6.4. The Council uses the same eight themes for monitoring our children's social care corporate complaints. The majority of corporate complaints for the year 2023-24 were regarding the conduct of staff. Other complaints were regarding

the appropriateness or quality of a service and we received one complaint about Child Protection matters.

- 6.5. The timeframe for responding to corporate complaints at Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the procedure is 20 working days. Of the 25 Stage 1 corporate complaints, 20 (80%) were responded to by the deadline and of the four Stage 2 corporate complaints, 3 (75%) were responded to by the deadline.

7. Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

- 7.1. This report provides a brief overview of the children's social care complaints referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and received by the Council. A complainant may escalate their complaint to the LGSCO at any time. However, the LGSCO will seek to ensure that the Council has had the opportunity to respond and resolve the complaint in accordance with the statutory procedure.
- 7.2. In 2023-24, a total of eight enquiries were made regarding children's social care. Five of the eight complaints were closed after initial enquiries and one was referred back to the Council for local resolution. The remaining two complaints underwent a full investigation and were upheld. An additional children's social care complaint was upheld by the Ombudsman in 2023-24 that had been referred to the Council in 2022-23.
- 7.3. The table below shows the three complaints that were upheld in 2023-24, what the Council was found at fault for and the actions taken to remedy the complaint.

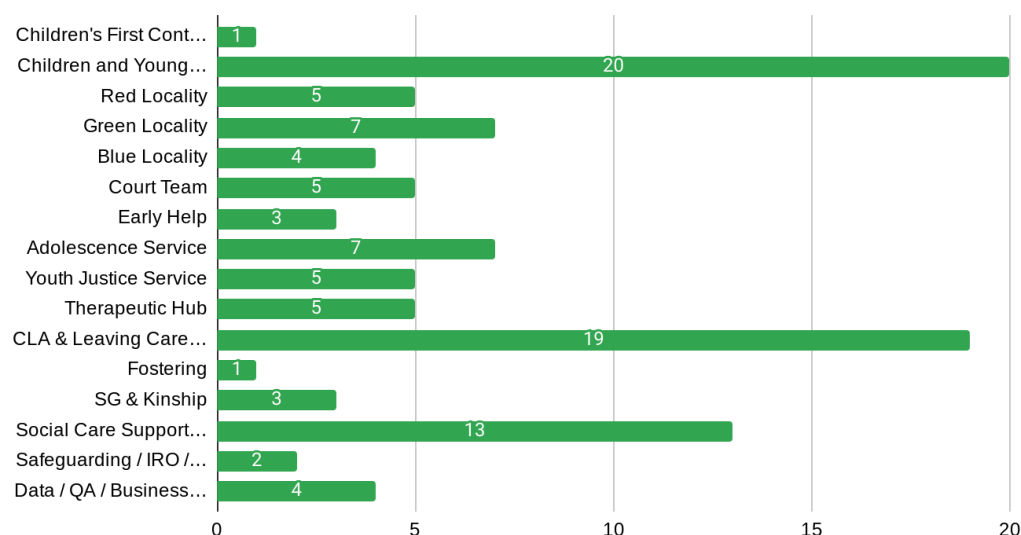
Reference	Areas of fault	Summary improvements made
22017116	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failed to reply to the complaint under the statutory children's complaints procedure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Written apology. Remedy payment offered.
23001125	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delayed its response under the statutory process for complaints about children's services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Written apology. Remedy payment offered.
23000904	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delay in completing Stage 2 of the statutory children's complaints procedure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Written apology. Remedy payment offered. Reviewed processes for considering complaints under

		<p>the statutory children’s complaint procedure.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivered training to ensure complaints are handled correctly in line with the procedure.
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- 7.4. The Council recognises that all upheld complaints focus on the complaint handling aspect in relation to the statutory procedure. Specifically where the Council has delayed in its response to the complaint or where the Council has failed to appropriately escalate the complaint to the next stage of the procedure.
- 7.5. We have reviewed our processes for considering complaints under the statutory complaints procedure and have delivered training to colleagues who triage children’s complaints to ensure they are appropriately handled going forward.
- 7.6. The Council is confident that these issues have now been addressed and we do not expect any further issues in 2024-25.

8. Compliments

- 1.1. In 2023-24, the Council received 104 compliments regarding children’s social care services. These compliments are from service users, family members, stakeholders and practitioners.
- 8.1. The graph below shows the number of compliments received by each service for the year. Our Children and Young People Disability Service (CYPDS) received the most compliments.



- 8.2. The compliments cover a range of themes from building good relationships, good communication skills, attention to detail and efficient services. Below are some examples of compliments received:
- 8.3. *I think [social worker] was a brilliant help and big part of my life. They always supported me when I needed and made me feel heard and seen when no one else was. They've made a big difference in a good way to my life and I will forever be grateful for that. **Adolescent Service***
- 8.4. *Thank you so much to [social worker] and all of your team for all you have done for our [service user] we are so grateful. Honestly [social worker] has been such a great support to our [service user] and our family. [social worker] is honestly one of the best support workers that our [service user] has ever had. **CLA & Leaving Care Team***
- 8.5. *[social worker] is one of the most helpful people I speak with, they always answer the phone to me and sorts things out for us explaining everything clearly. [social worker] is a real gem to your service. **Children and Young People Disability Service***
- 8.6. *Thanks [social worker], I hope our paths cross again. You are an excellent social worker and were a pleasure to work with. **Court Team***
- 8.7. *A parent shared during feedback that they are super grateful for the support from both the social worker and specialist support worker. They state that both have advocated on their behalf and the child is responding well to the*

interventions. The parent said they changed their perception of social care and the joint approach has been really beneficial. **Green Locality**

9. Learning and Service Improvement

1.1. Learning from the experiences of our service users and their families can identify where our services, policies and procedures can be improved. It also helps to keep senior leadership at the Council informed of the matters that are important to our residents, improve communication and strengthen relationships with our service users.

9.1. Key learnings from the complaints and compliments received for the year 2023-24 fall into the following categories:

- Complaint Handling;
- Special Guardianship Processes; and
- Record Keeping.

9.2. The learning and actions being taken to address these are summarised below.

9.3. Complaint Handling

Learning: To improve the Council's complaint handling of statutory complaints to ensure a smooth process for escalation and improved timeliness of responses. This work is in progress and we're taking the following actions to support this:

- Continuous training/development with the Customer Care team on the statutory complaints procedure and the handling of these complaints in line with best practice to improve/build resilience.
- We have reviewed our internal processes to ensure we are aligned to the "Getting the Best from Complaints" guidance.
- A dedicated resource for dealing with the escalation of statutory complaints to improve timeliness of escalation and response.

9.4. Special Guardianship Processes

Learning: To improve special guardianship processes to ensure clear guidance is given at the outset to include advice and support available to special guardians. This work is in progress and we're taking the following actions to support this:

- Practice guidance on special guardianship was reviewed, developed and disseminated to all social work staff.
- Staff were reminded of our communication practice directive and expectations of recording through email and learning from complaints.
- Documentation for potential kinship carers to be reviewed and made accessible to locality staff for ease of dissemination to potential carers, this will include information about financial support available.

9.5. Record Keeping

Learning: To improve record keeping processes in respect of assessments carried out on service users. This work is complete and we have taken the following actions:

- All staff within Children's services were reminded that it is essential within assessments to detail how the assessment was conducted and the context and rationale for why the assessment is being undertaken and that the analysis should identify whether safeguarding concerns are present or not.

9.6. The Council will continue to learn from its strengths and what we do well. Such as building good relationships with service users, good communication, attention to detail and incorporating the learnings from complaints into service improvement and delivery.

10. Further Information

10.1. For more information regarding Children's Social Care complaints and compliments, please contact the Customer Care team on 020 8770 5000 or email complaints@sutton.gov.uk.