



Cheshire West and Chester Council

Children's Social Care Complaints and Compliments

Annual Report
2024-2025

Introduction

This report provides information about the Children's Social Care Complaints and Compliments received by Cheshire West and Chester Council during the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025. It highlights performance against statutory and internal timescales for complaint handling and provides assurance that improvements or revisions to services have been identified as a result of listening and responding to both compliments and complaints.

The Council's Customer team, part of the Companies, Compliance and Assurance service within the Governance Directorate, was responsible for the coordination of complaints and compliments during this period. The Children and Families service are responsible for reviewing, resolving and responding to complaints and compliments. The Customer Team review all draft responses and provide advice and support to services about the complaints process and reasonable outcomes or remedies to complaints.

In accordance with statutory guidance, responses to complaints received by the Authority should be proportionate. Officers are encouraged to resolve matters locally at the first point of contact to avoid escalation wherever possible. Concerns raised with the service and resolved by close of play the following day are not counted as statutory complaints. Where this approach does not deliver a satisfactory outcome for the complainant, matters are then referred through the formal complaints' procedure. See [Appendix B](#).

The objectives of this report are to:

- be open and transparent about our social care complaints process
- meet our statutory obligation to produce an annual report
- provide clear and concise comparative data on complaints and compliments including details of complaints broken down by subject and service area
- provide a summary of customer profile and type of customer interaction
- identify service improvements as a result of complaints and compliments and demonstrate learning and improved practices and processes from these

Context

Whilst considering this report it is important to know the overall picture of Children's social care involvement in the Cheshire West and Chester area. During 2024-25, children's services received **14554** child contacts. **5529** were received at statutory social work level. **3517** child contacts progressed to a statutory social care (Children in Need) referral in 2024-25. Of those **3517** receiving Statutory Social Work referral, 30 formal complaints were logged and responded to, representing 0.8% of the children the Council screened as requiring a Children's Social Care response. This is a small increase on the previous year from 0.7%, despite a 2% increase in statutory social care referrals (from 3,435 in 2023-24 to 3,517 in 2024-25). During network events with other Local Authorities there is a general consensus evidenced by data that volumes of CSC are increasing nationally.

Performance Activity

Summary of Complaint Activity

- 1.1 From April 2024 to March 2025 there were a total of 123 social care complaint representations made to Cheshire West and Chester Council. Of the 123 representations received, there were **30 valid complaints** progressed, with the remaining 93 either ineligible (18) or withdrawn / resolved via an alternative route, including through early intervention/local resolution (75). The number of representations and valid complaints from these has decreased significantly since last year, with complaint representations down by 53% and valid complaints up by 18%. Since the summer of 2024 there has been a positive impact in recruitment and retention of social workers across the service, and over time has started to reduce the use of agency workers. This will have increased stability and consistency for families and may account for some of the reduction in complaint representations.
- 1.2 Of the 30 formal complaints, 9 requested a stage 2 escalation as the complainant remained dissatisfied. These 9 escalations were all accepted. Then of those 9 formal stages 2s, 4 progressed to stage 3 of the process and to Review Panel.

Comparison with Previous Years

- 1.3 The table below shows the number of considered and progressed complaints for the year compared with the previous four years.

Table 1: Total number of complaints considered.

| Year | Total no. of valid complaints processed | Withdrawn/ not pursued/ other | Ineligible* | Total no. of complaints representations considered |
|----------------|---|-------------------------------|-------------|--|
| 2024-25 | 30 | 75 | 18 | 123 |
| 2023-24 | 25 | 133 | 53 | 211 |
| 2022-23 | 14 | 97 | 26 | 137 |
| 2021-22 | 14 | 93 | 24 | 131 |
| 2020-21 | 15 | 94 | 16 | 125 |

**Complaints assessed as being not valid through the statutory Social Care complaint procedure, for example complaints that were being dealt with through court or doesn't match the criteria of who may complain and is therefore ineligible.*

Numbers of Complaints - Analysis Complaint

Outcomes

The table below shows where a formal complaint has been upheld, partially upheld or not upheld. Where complaints are complex and raise a number of different issues, there is a greater likelihood that some elements of a complaint will be upheld, whilst others not, and consequently the complaint will be classified as partially upheld overall. Volumes at stage 1 have increased on the previous year, as has the % of upheld and partially upheld cases identifying fault.

Stage 2 complaints recorded more 'partially upheld' outcomes than previous years. Given there are external costs involved in progressing stage 2 complaints this is an indicator for the Customer and Children and Families teams to review their triage and stage 1 handling processes to ensure that we identify and resolve fault at earlier stages. We continue to manage very low numbers of escalations to stage 3 of the complaint process.

Table 2 - Stage 1 outcomes and comparisons with previous years

| Year | Upheld | Partially upheld | Not upheld | Outstanding | Total |
|----------------|----------|------------------|------------|-------------|-----------|
| 2024-25 | 4 | 19 | 7 | 0 | 30 |
| 2023-24 | 2 | 14 | 9 | 0 | 25 |
| 2022-23 | 1 | 11 | 2 | 0 | 14 |
| 2021-22 | 1 | 10 | 3 | 0 | 14 |
| 2020-21 | 2 | 11 | 2 | 0 | 15 |

Table 3 - Stage 2 outcomes and comparisons with previous years

| Year | Upheld | Partially upheld | Not upheld | Open cases | Withdrawn | Total |
|----------------|----------|------------------|------------|------------|-----------|----------|
| 2024-25 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 |
| 2023-24 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 7 |
| 2022-23 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 5 |
| 2021-22 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| 2020-21 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 |

Table 4 - Stage 3 outcomes and comparisons with previous year

| Year | Upheld | Partially upheld | Not upheld (No Fault)* | Open cases | Withdrawn | Total |
|----------------|----------|------------------|------------------------|------------|-----------|----------|
| 2024-25 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| 2023-24 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| 2022-23 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 2021-22 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2020-21 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

**No fault – but Chair may still make recommendations for good practice.*

2. Breakdown of complaints received by Service Area

Table 5 below shows a breakdown of complaints received by each service area.

Table 5

| Service Area | | | | | |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Children in Need | 2024-25 | 2023-24 | 2022-23 | 2021-22 | 2020-21 |
| Winsford | 3 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Chester | 9 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| Ellesmere Port | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| CP Court Team | | | | | |
| Winsford | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Chester | 2 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Ellesmere Port | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Children in Care (Permanence Teams') | | | | | |
| Winsford | 3 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Ellesmere Port | 5 | 7 | 4 | 0 | 6 |
| Leaving Care (Supporting Independence) | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Children with Disabilities | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Provider Services | | | | | |
| Fostering | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Adoption | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Safeguarding | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Integrated Access and Referral Team and Integrated Early Support | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Transition Team | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Emergency Duty Team | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 30 | 25 | 14 | 14 | 15 |

As we know, there has been a slight increase in complaints overall and the largest increase in complaints from last year are from the Children in Need Team Chester. Analysis has been undertaken of these complaints to the Chester team. It is interesting to note that a number of these relate to complexities arising within parental conflict, private law and separated parents, following which training with CAFCASS to the service has been delivered to help improve practice and response. 2 of the complaints in Chester relate to one practitioner who has since had their employment ended due to concerns for practice issues.

As with previous years, the Customer Relations Team will continue to work closely with the Children's Services team to identify solutions to prevent customers using the complaint process to raise general dissatisfaction with decisions, rather than for its real purpose for highlighting alleged fault.

Breakdown of complaints received by Subject

By their nature, complaints are specific to the circumstances of the individual and cover a wide range of individual experiences. Most complaints also relate to more than one aspect of a service that has been received.

Complaints received by the Authority have been classified on the primary area of concern (subject) identified by the complainant. Detailed below are the numbers that fall within each category:

Table 6

| Complaint Subject (Primary area of concern) | 2024-25 | 2023-24 | 2022-23 | 2021-22 | 2020-21 |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Standard of Service Delivery | 19 | 16 | 7 | 10 | 10 |
| Inaccuracies in assessments | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Lack of support | 15 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 7 |
| Failure to investigate concerns | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Issues with contact arrangements | 4 | 9 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Other | 0 | 0 | 6 | 3 | 0 |
| Social Worker | 7 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| Allegations of Misconduct | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Issues with Attitude / Behaviour | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Lack of Support | 7 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| Preference for one parent over another | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Social Worker and Team Manager | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

| | | | | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Communication | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Lack of response | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Late / missing reports | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Cancellation of appointments | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Child Protection Issues | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Financial Issues | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Accommodation/Placement Issues | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Adoption | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Fostering Issues | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Eligibility for Service / Unhappy with Social Care involvement | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Data Protection Issues | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 30 | 25 | 14 | 14 | 15 |

Complaints about the standard of service delivery has risen from last year, along with lack of support from social workers. The service is committed to delivering effective practice and support for our children and families. The service recognise that caseloads of social workers can have an impact on how effective families are supported, especially in terms of how creative and persistent this is, or is experienced as being, by the families themselves. Since July 2024 the service has worked intensively to improve the stability of teams through recruitment and retention, whilst ensuring more consistent threshold application so that only those children and families who need our support are opened to a referral. As a result and over a period of time, caseload numbers have stabilised, meaning there is an improved response to families from teams with fewer agency workers. The implementation of a new service delivery model as part of Families First for Children Partnership Programme from April 2026 with vision for even smaller caseloads and fewer hand-overs between teams, should improve this further.

Complaint Response Times

Table 7 - Complaint response times

| Statutory time frames | 2024-25 | 2023-24 | 2022-23 | 2021-22 | 2020-21 |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 10 working days or less | 3 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| 20 working days or less | 14 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| Outside the statutory timescale | 13 | 17 | 10 | 12 | 9 |
| Total | 30 | 25 | 14 | 14 | 15 |

There has been an increase in compliance despite the slight increase in stage 1 complaints this year. However compliance with statutory timescales continues to be a concern, with only 56% of complaints answered in time.

3. Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO)

The Ombudsman reports on local authority figures based on the number of cases it receives in the reporting year; the number of decisions it makes in the reporting year (which may include cases ongoing from the previous year) and the Council's compliance with any recommendations.

In 2024-2025 the Ombudsman:

- Received 84 complaints, of which 3 related to Children's Services.
- Made decisions on 78 complaints, of which 12 related to Children's Services. The outcome of these were:
 - 6 closed after initial enquiries
 - 1 advice given
 - 5 referred for local resolution
- Upheld 10 complaints, none of which related to Children's Services. This is a reduction on last year where 2 complaints were upheld against Children's Services.

Point of receipt for complaints within the authority.

The Customer Relations Team records 'point of receipt' of complaints into the Council. Table 8 shows that the established systems for ensuring that complaints are directed to the Customer Relations Team for co-ordination continue to work well.

Table 8

| Point of receipt | 2024-25 | 2023-24 | 2022-23 | 2021-22 | 2020-21 |
|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Service Area | 3 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Customer Relations Team | 21 | 20 | 13 | 9 | 12 |
| Director/Head of Service | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Chief Executive | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Other | 4 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Total | 30 | 25 | 14 | 14 | 15 |

4. Profile/ Category of Complainants

A summary of customer profile and type of customer interaction has shown the following: that young people prefer to raise things informally

Table 9

| Person making the complaint | 2024-25 | 2023-24 | 2022-23 | 2021-22 | 2020-21 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Child or young person being looked after or in need | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Parent/s | 26 | 22 | 12 | 11 | 12 |
| Local Authority foster carer | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Special guardian | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Persons wishing to adopt | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Persons with sufficient interest in child's welfare | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Advocacy service | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 30 | 25 | 14 | 14 | 15 |

5. Compliments Received

- 5.1 Compliments were recorded by the corporate team during the year continue to be low, at 13 representing 4% of the total 299 compliments received.

Work on a new process for capturing these has been delayed but will be addressed in 2025-26.

A selection of compliments recorded is included below as examples:

Feedback from Parent to Social Worker:

Since being dropped down to a child in need plan and Social Worker being involved there is not a single thing I could fault her on. Social Worker has been so helpful in every situation that has occurred if I have not agreed with something she has always come up with a plan that is in the best interests of XXXX and agreeable by us both. I have had many issues with my housing and Social Worker had fought my corner every step of the way. Social Worker definitely makes my wishes feel heard and supports in any way that she can.

Feedback from Health Visitor:

I just wanted to share that I have a few families that can't comment enough about the Social Workers practice. Some of these families are really challenging but she handles them and their challenges really well in such a calm manner, always sensible and fair. It's a real pleasure to work with her.

Feedback from Police:

DCs have just come back and have been singing Social Worker's praises – they said he was amazing, and it was a breath of fresh air working with him today. They are very impressed!!

Feedback from Family:

In relation to the 12-month supervision order for my daughter.

We are very grateful for being given the opportunity of a supervision order. It has given us the chance to show our parenting skills and show how much we adore our daughter. The supervision order was necessary because it gave both us and the Local Authority chance to show that we could work together without too much intrusion on our family, but with the support and opportunities to help us strengthen our skills as parents. We now feel fully prepared to face anything that comes our way.

The process was very smooth and helped us to get the help that we needed. I cannot express my gratitude for being given the opportunity to address many childhood traumas through the Local Authority.

We would also like to express our gratitude to the Social Worker. She is the Social Worker that every family needs. This process was far smoother and far less stressful when she was given our case. We were far less scared, and much less anxious and no longer looking over our shoulders. Before the Social Worker was given our case, we were so fearful that at times we could not even eat. The Social Worker has helped and supported our family throughout this process; she has given excellent guidance and did everything in a professional manner. The Social Worker is the reason we are no longer scared of the Local Authority; we are now happy to work with them.

Feedback from a Mum to Social Worker and Team:

To say thank you for your support. Despite the challenges we have faced getting the children, the right support, I feel like I have had the best team around me- I know from a lot of groups I am in online, that parents often feel blamed and judged by schools and social care, but I have never felt that anyone has ever blamed me or made XXXX feel bad for what has happened. That drive to really understand his needs and work from his place, has meant we have got the best possible outcome. I know PEGS thought you were exceptional in your approach, and I hope you will be able to spread your expertise far and wide about the realities of working with CPA. There has always been that sense in our meetings of, what can we try, what on earth is that what does that acronym stand for, what could we do better...that drive for learning and accepting not knowing everything made you feel professional and human in the best combination.

And most importantly, as I always said, thank you for sticking- there is nothing harder than getting passed around and starting again every time- I think that has made a difference to getting where we are- in fact, the whole team has stuck together and it's good to see where we've got to!

I wish you all the best for the future; I hope social care looks after you as I'm sure there are so many families who will continue to benefit from your kindness and compassion at difficult times.

Feedback from Young Person:

XXXXXX had some lovely feedback to share about Social Worker and I wanted to pass this onto you.

XXXXXX is grateful for all the work Social Worker has done for him, he feels that she always listens and acts on his wishes, which is great!

XXXXXXX understands that the plan will be for him to be allocated a new social worker from the supporting independence team and said that he would prefer to keep current Social Worker but hopes that his next Social Worker is as good as her!

6. Outcomes- Learning and Service Improvement

- 6.1 The Council has identified areas and opportunities from which learning can be taken from the complaints and the compliments process and used to improve future service delivery.

Our Way of Working Programme:

This is Children's Services' practice model and the framework by which professionals work with families. We know that this approach is having a positive impact on the approach of social workers with children and families, this being recognised in the recent Ofsted inspection. However, this could also be having a positive impact on the complaints that families make, especially if they are sensing that they can form a more positive relationship with their worker. From August 2025 our practice model is being extended to include principles of Systemic Practice, which is about seeing a person or a difficulty within the wider context of networks and relationship, and promotes a more relational approach to social work practice. All practitioners and managers are being trained in this approach which is believed to have even more benefit on the impact and relationship the service has with children and families.

Learning from Complaints and Compliments

The service recognised the complexities arising from working with parental conflict within private family law, noted as a theme in a number of the Chester complaints, and two others in Winsford and Ellesmere port. As a result CAFCASS Child and Family Court Advisory Service) came to deliver training to the service to help social workers better navigate these complexities within practice and report writing.

Another theme noted within complaints has been about the collaborative agreement between families and social workers about the plan for the child and the threshold of the plan. Whilst there may always be some level of disagreement about this, Systemic Practice and promoting a more relational approach to practice should enable the service to work more collaboratively with families about these issues.

As part of the preparation for service delivery and redesign to implement the new national guidance for the Family First Partnership Programme, the service have developed a Lived Experience Reference Group to help co-design principles of practice and approach. We have recognised as part of this work that the service need to have more information readily available to help families understand processes and decision-making, such as the Child Protection process. This is being taken forward ready for implementation in April 2026.

Continued work is in place to stabilise teams and reduce reliance on agency workers throughout the service. It is recognised that this has impact on the experience of children and families, and their view about the quality and impact of support provided – noted earlier within this report.

Retention of social workers has already improved, and use of agency staff has reduced significantly as a result. The workforce census as at September 2025 noted a number of improvements, all having a positive impact on children and families. 14.9% improvement in employed staff – 18 FTE more employed social workers than 12 months earlier. The average caseload decreased from 19.5 to 16.4 cases per worker. Social worker absence reduced by 29.6% to 840 days and employee turnover reduced from 16.7% FTE to 6% FTE.

7. Future Plans for Complaint Handling

- There is a need for service to review how complaints are logged, allocated and coordinated through the Firmstep portal used, as currently this progresses through one single point of contact which places some risk of failure or delay.
- Ongoing support and development for staff through training workshops on the case management system and complaint handling, complemented by new and updated training materials. The focus is on strong administrative practices, effective case management, timely communication, adherence to compliance timescales, and empowering staff to work confidently and efficiently.
- Customer Network Conference took place in June 2025 with a focus on complaints handling and using attendance feedback a second conference will take place Spring 2026 to continue to develop and support staff who handle complaints.
- Reunion of our Customer Ambassador network with a focused work plan to ensure engagement and co-production in developing and advocating complaint handling best practices.
- We plan to work with service around Customer experience to gain increased feedback as a regular part of service delivery is being developed through the use of MS Forms. It is hoped that this influences improved service delivery and learning.
- There is further training required to support a new group of team managers with early resolution strategies.
- There is a newly developed leaflet for children to engage with complaints and compliments as appropriate and a revision of the general service complaints information guide for families. This is hoped to improve complaint handling and understanding of what the service are able to respond to.
- There are improvements to practice the service is required to make as a result of the iLACS inspection, results from this should have positive impact on families experience of service delivery.
- Provided bespoke training on complaint handling to improve consistency and share best practice
- Drop in sessions provided to areas of the service to support volume and complexity of enquiries with a direct positive impact as a result of these
- Engagement with Children in Care Council to shape the Customer Vision and Strategy
- The team itself have received Ombudsman training to ensure all are following updated code changes and can cascade this information.
- The creation of a Customer Operational Manager post and the on-boarding of Customer Services is allowing front line staff to signpost potential complainants to correct contact route. Customer Services was previously an arms length company resulting in a lack of holistic approach at all contact levels.
- We have been successful in joining the LGSCO Advisory Forum – a new forum to share best practice with Ombudsman overview. This will be an opportunity to look at other LA processes and implement best proactive practices to actively avoid complaints and foster positive engagement between parents /carers and Children's services practitioners.
- Our new reporting dashboard aiming to go live in January will provide live data for compliance rates meaning unhappy complainants will receive outcomes in a timely fashion which should help with the overall parental/carers experience.

End of report.

Appendix A

What makes a Valid Complaint under Children's Social Care

Eligibility is established by the Customer Relations Team in conjunction with the Service as follows:

- That the person complaining is eligible to make a complaint (some examples below: Any looked after child or child in need/ A parent of the child/ Any person who has PR/ Any local authority foster carer)
- 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. The complaint can be about any aspect of the service that has been provided. For example, a complaint may arise as a result of many things relating to statutory social services functions such as: • an unwelcome or disputed decision; • concern about the quality or appropriateness of a service; • delay in decision making or provision of services; • delivery or non-delivery of services including complaints procedures; • quantity, frequency, change or cost of a service; • attitude or behaviour of staff; • application of eligibility and assessment criteria; • the impact on a child or young person of the application of a local authority policy; and • assessment, care management and review. However, this is not an exhaustive list and the Customer Relations Team will seek legal advice as necessary.

Exemptions from the Complaints Procedure

- If the person complaining does not meet the requirement of "who can complain"
- If the complaint is not in relation to the actions or decisions of the Local Authority complained to, or of any Body acting on its behalf.
- If the same complaint has already been dealt with at all stages of the complaint process
- Data Protection Matters
- Child Protection Conference Appeal
- Out of Time (needs to be within 12 months when the issue happened)

The Local Authority has the discretion to not deal with a complaint if they feel it would prejudice the following concurrent investigations:

- Court Proceedings
- Tribunals
- Disciplinary Proceedings
- Criminal Proceedings

If this is the case, the Local Authority will write to the complainant explaining the reasons for the decision.

Appendix B

Statutory Compliance Procedure

The Children's Social Care Complaints Procedure

The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006; Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000; Adoption and Children Act 2002; and the Health and Social Care Act 2003 require the local authority to have a procedure for resolving complaints and representations received by, on behalf of, or relating to children and young people. A local authority must also ensure that action is taken if necessary, in the light of the outcome of a complaint.

The current Children's Social Care and Health complaints procedure consists of a three-stage process. The complainant retains the right to approach the independent Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman at any time. However, the Ombudsman would expect the local authority to consider the complaint initially.

Role of the Customer Relations Team

The Customer Relations Team is responsible for the handling and consideration of complaints and acts as a central point through which complaints can be made to the Council. Complaints can be made via telephone; in writing; through the online social care complaints portal; or directly to the dedicated social care complaints email inbox. Complaints received directly by the Service are currently referred to the Customer Relations Team to be assessed for eligibility.

The Customer Relations Team, often in liaison with the Service, will determine whether a complaint is eligible for consideration under the statutory framework or whether an alternative route (for example safeguarding or through the corporate complaints process if the issue complained about is not related to the quality of care provided) would be more appropriate (see Appendix A).

The Customer Relations Team offer training, advice and support to staff in their consideration of complaints and perform a quality assurance role in the preparation of complaint responses. The Team also liaise with complainants to keep them informed on progress with their complaints and provide advice about the complaints process and the role of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

The Team also coordinates the completion of Learning Outcome and Action Reports for the service, which ensures there is learning and improvement identified from investigations into complaints. This is recorded and reported centrally and monitored to ensure that the implementation of identified, agreed actions following the outcome of complaints is carried out. Learning is shared with other services, where it is relevant to do so, in order to improve service delivery Council-wide.

What is a Complaint?

Any expression of dissatisfaction about a council service (whether that service is provided by the council or by a contractor or partner) that requires a response.

There is no difference between a 'formal' and an 'informal' complaint. Both are expressions of dissatisfaction that require a response.

Who Can Make a Complaint?

There are a variety of people who can complain:

- i. Any child or young person who is Looked After or who is a child in need or is a child with disabilities
- ii. Foster parents
- iii. People applying to adopt, or who are receiving services from our Adoption service
- iv. Care leavers
- v. Special Guardians

Complaints can also be accepted from individuals acting on behalf of a service user, for example an advocate or family member, although this must be with consent from the service user when they are considered old enough. Where a service user's capacity to make informed decisions may be in question, the Customer Relations Team - in conjunction with the Service Team Manager - will look at whether the person pursuing the complaint is acting in the young person's best interests.

Initial Expressions of Dissatisfaction

Initially complaints are always assessed or 'triaged' by the Customer Relations Team. If, from initial assessment, it looks like the complaint can be resolved by close of play the following day, it is not required to proceed through the complaints process. These concerns/issues are often relatively minor and resolution can most easily be addressed locally through the service. The customer is always advised how they can progress their complaint if they remain dissatisfied.

Urgent safeguarding issues and alternative paths

The Customer Relations Team review all complaints to identify any potential safeguarding risks or concerns that need immediate attention. Where safeguarding issues are identified, those matters are redirected to be considered under the appropriate safeguarding procedures without delay. Where there are no obvious safeguarding concerns complaints are referred via the Customer Relations Team to a Senior Manager to be considered through the social care complaints procedure.

All, or parts of a complaint may not be eligible under the social care complaint process. Where this is the case all non-social care elements will be referred to the corporate complaints policy or a more appropriate 'alternative path' and the customer kept informed about how their complaint, or parts of their complaint, will be dealt with.

Stage 1 – Local Resolution

The majority of Stage 1 investigations are conducted by Team Managers from the relevant service. The investigation of a complaint is a managerial responsibility and should not be delegated to other staff. In the first instance complaints are allocated to the Senior Manager to appoint an appropriate Team Manager to investigate and draft a response to the complainant.

The initial timescale for providing a response is 10 working days, although this can be extended to 20 working days when a matter is more complex. Where the issue is identified as more complex, more often than not the senior manager becomes more involved to either support the manager, or take the lead, in securing an early resolution. The Customer Relations Team works with managers to ensure that quality responses are produced within the specific timescales. Decisions are recorded for each complaint as upheld, not upheld or partially upheld. The learning outcomes and remedial actions are shared with the complainant within the written response.

Stage 2 – Formal Independent Investigation

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the findings of the Stage 1 complaint investigation, or has not received a response to Stage 1 within the 20 working days allowed, then a request for a Stage 2 investigation can be made.

Once the scope of the Stage 2 investigation has been agreed an Investigating Officer (IO) will be appointed. Investigators can be an officer from the service who has no previous knowledge of the complaint and no line management responsibility. Alternatively, the IO can be appointed from the North West Complaint Managers Group List of Independent People. The IO will lead and has overall responsibility for the investigation and will prepare the main report which will state outcomes and make recommendations to the service where appropriate. The Council's current practice is to recruit exclusively from this list.

A second person, the Independent Person (IP) will be appointed from the North West Complaint Managers Group List of Independent People. The IP ensures that the process of investigation is open, transparent and fair. They work alongside the IO to provide an independent and objective view of the investigation.

They see all the same relevant files as the IO and participate in all interviews and discussion relevant to the investigation. The IP reads the IO's report and produces their own report on the investigation, commenting on each complaint element and stating whether they agree with the IO's findings.

There are up to 25 working days for the completion of the Stage 2 investigation, with an extension of up to 65 working days available for complex cases.

Following an investigation the findings and any recommendations are set out in a report to the Director and the Service Team Manager. The service must provide a written response to the report and this will be sent to the complainant, along with a copy of the report, within 10 working days of receiving the report. The service may consider offering a meeting with the complainant to discuss the report and the response.

Stage 3 – Independent Review Panel

Where complainants wish to proceed to Stage 3 they have 20 working days (from the date that they received notification of the department's response to the stage 2 report) to request a Review Panel.

The Independent Review Panel consists of three independent people drawn from the North West List of Independent People, one of whom is appointed as Chair of the Panel.

Following the investigation, panel members have 5 working days to agree the report. The report has to be sent to the complainant within the 5 working days and a copy is also given to the Director of Children's Services.

The Director has 20 working days from the day of the panel to write to the complainant with their response to the report. The letter should outline what the directorate intends to do as part of learning from the complaint. The letter will also explain that if the complainant remains unhappy they can contact the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

Where complaints remain unresolved to the satisfaction of the complainant, a referral may be made to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) for consideration. This can be done by the complainant following completion of all 3 stages of the children's social care complaint process or at an earlier stage if there is a mutual agreement between the complainant and the Council to do so. The Ombudsman will require reasons for the referral if it is done prior to completion of all stages of the policy. The Council will usually seek advice from the Ombudsman's office before making any referral.