

**Annual Complaints
Report
Children's Services
Wandsworth
2023-24**

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report is produced annually as a statutory requirement for the London Borough of Wandsworth: it provides a summary analysis of social care complaints within Children's social care services.
- 1.1. There is a duty on all local authorities to maintain and operate a complaints procedure for children's social care services.
- 1.2. Wandsworth Council's Children's Services complaints sit within the remit Resident Engagement Service. There is a statutory requirement to have a Statutory Complaints Manager in post. The Complaints Team is led by the Corporate and Statutory Complaints Service Manager who reports to the Head of Resident Engagement. The Complaints Team also comprises of two operational managers: the Adult and Children's Complaints Manager and the Corporate and Ombudsman Complaints Manager. They are supported by five complaint officers.
- 1.3. The Complaints Team is an important corporate function within the Council. Its role is to support the organisation to ensure that the Council has effective and efficient complaints procedures, in line with best practice and statutory requirements. The complaints team also have responsibility to train and support council officers to respond effectively to complaints and ensure learning from complaints feeds directly into service improvement.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. There is a legal requirement to have in place a complaints procedure and produce an annual report for complaints about the Council's actions under Part 3 and some of Parts 4 and 5 of the Children's Act 1989.
- 2.2. The statutory complaints procedure is a 3-stage procedure with recourse to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) if the Council is unable to resolve the complaint.
- 2.3. Learning from complaints is summarised in Section 5 and case studies are provided throughout the report. This year learning has focused on improving communication and engagement to connect better with young people and families, enhancing support to care leavers, ensuring reasonable adjustments are identified and provided, enhancing record keeping and streamlining the Direct Payment process so that it is understood by families.
- 2.4. Children's Services completed 37 statutory complaints in total across all three stages during 2023/24. These are highlighted in **Table 1**. This represents a 40% decrease on the previous year when 62 were completed.

- 2.5. Alongside the 37 formal statutory complaints, in liaison with Children's Social Care teams, the Complaints Team swiftly resolved 12 low level complaints that had the potential to become formal complaints without this intervention.
- 2.6. 57% of stage 1 complaints were for the Family Safeguarding and supporting Disabled Children Service (which supports Children in Need, Child Protection and Disabled Children). Next the Advice, Help and Support Service, responsible for assessing referrals at the 'front door' and the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) received 25% of stage 1 complaints. 18% of stage 1 complaints were for the Children Looked After service.
- 2.7. When broken down by the top 5 principal issues raised, the most frequently raised principal issue at stage 1 was **lack of support** which accounted for 25% (7) of complaints (or 7 complaints). Then, **quality of assessment** accounted for 18% or 5 complaints (or 5 complaints), followed by **delays in service** 14% (or 4 complaints), **placement issues** also at 14% (or 4 complaints) and then **staff behaviour** which accounted for 11% respectively (or 3 complaints).
- 2.8. At statutory stage 1, 50% of complaints were not upheld, 43% were partly upheld and 7% were fully upheld.
- 2.9. 75% of stage statutory 1 complaints were sent on time, only 1 of the 4 stage 2 complaint was sent out later than the 65 working day timescale, and whilst neither of the 2 stage 3 panels were held on time due to the availability of panel members, in both cases, the Director's Report was sent out within the statutory timeframe.
- 2.10. 14% of stage 1 statutory complaints were received directly from young people. 2 of these escalated to stage 2 and 2 escalated to stage 3. Most young people who made complaints were care leavers raising concerns about their supported living placements and the adequacy of their pathway plans. The remaining 82% of stage 1 complaints were from parents or guardians and one (or 4%) complaint was from a family member.
- 2.11. Children's Services completed 44 stage 1 corporate complaints which is 6% lower than the 47 completed last year. 93% of stage 1 corporate complaints were on time. 20 complaints (45%) escalated to stage 2 which is slightly higher than the 17 complaints (36%) last year. Of these 20 complaints, 85% were on time.
- 2.12. There were 13 complaints made to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) compared to 15 last year. 4 of these were for statutory children's services and 9 were for education/SEND. From these complaints only 4 resulted in an investigation following assessment by the LGSCO. It is positive that the number of complaints being referred to the Ombudsman have reduced and that only 4 resulted in an investigation.
- 2.13. Section 16 provides compliments which evidence the good practice taking place in Children's Services.
- 2.14. Section 17 sets out the Complaints Team's key achievements this year and priorities going forward into 2024/25.

3. Legislation

- 3.1. There is a legal requirement for the Local Authority to have in place a complaints procedure, in accordance with Sections 24(D) and 26 of the Children Act 1989 and the Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 and the accompanying statutory guidance published by the DfE:, Getting the Best from Complaints: Social Care Complaints and Representations for Children, Young People and Others (01.09.2006) for the management of social care complaints.
- 3.2. The complaints procedure covers complaints about the Council's actions under Part 3 and some of Parts 4 and 5 of the Children's Act 1989. These are Children in Need, Looked after Children and Care Leavers, Special Guardianship Support and post-adoption support. The following areas tend to be exempt; Early Help, Child Protection, S47 enquiries and conferences, assessments for potential foster carers and adopters, foster carer registration and Section 7 and 37 court reports. The Council may decide to investigate these areas under other procedures, such as the Council's corporate complaints process or use the children's complaints procedure if complaint issues fall across both corporate and statutory procedures.
- 3.3. There is also a legal duty for the Local Authority to have in place advocacy arrangements for children and care leavers who wish to make representations or complaints regarding Children's Services and their care pursuant to the Advocacy Services and Representations Procedure (Children) (Amendment) Regulations 2004. Alongside these Regulations there is statutory guidance entitled Providing Effective Advocacy Services for Children and Young People Making a Complaint under the Children Act 1989.

4. Overview of the Children's Complaints Procedure

- 4.1. The complaints procedure is a three-stage process. The first stage is also known as local resolution stage. At Stage 1, complaints are investigated by the team where the complaint issue arose. In these cases, the team manager or service manager will usually investigate and respond to the complaint. The timescale for a stage 1 complaint response is 10 working days. However, where the complaint is complex or requires more time, an extension of up to a further 10 working days can be agreed by the Complaints Manager.
- 4.2. Where the complainant is dissatisfied with the stage 1 response, they can request a Stage 2 investigation. This stage requires an independent investigation, and two independent people are appointed by the Complaints Manager for the role of Independent Investigator and Independent Person. The investigation team produce reports which are passed to a senior officer within Children's Services for adjudication and response to the complainant at Stage 2. The statutory timescale for this stage is 25 to 65 working days.
- 4.3. It is a statutory requirement to commission an independent person (IP) to oversee the integrity of a stage 2 investigation to ensure it remains child focused. It is good practice to appoint an IP who has not been employed by the council for a minimum

of three years. Wandsworth Council commission external officers to undertake this role.

- 4.4. Stage 3 is the final stage of the complaint's procedure. If a complainant remains unhappy following the findings of the Stage 2 investigation, they can request that their complaint is reviewed at Stage 3 by an independent panel. The panel hearing must take place within 30 working days of the request. The panel is made up of three people and the complainant has an opportunity to present their case to the panel alongside the Council. The chair of the panel will then send their decision to the complainant and the Director of Children's Services within five working days of the panel hearing and the Director must respond to the complainant within 15 working days.
- 4.5. A complaint is defined as ***'an expression of dissatisfaction or disquiet in relation to an individual child or young person, which requires a response.'***
- 4.6. Complaints can be made by the young person receiving a direct service from Children's Services or by a person on their behalf such as an advocate or family member where the service user has provided their written consent if they are Fraser competent¹.
- 4.7. Where a service is provided by a contractor on behalf of the Council, a complaint can either be made directly to the external provider service or to the complaints team at Wandsworth Council. Whilst the Complaints Team will encourage a provider service to firstly attempt resolution through its own procedures, if this is not possible, the Commissioning and Contract Monitoring Team will investigate.
- 4.8. Complaints will be considered if they are made within 12 months of the incident although the Council can apply their discretion to waive this time limit in some instances.
- 4.9. The Complaints Team have the discretion to put on hold a complaint (or certain aspects of a complaint), if there is a concurrent process addressing the same issues, for example, the matter will be discussed in court. Once the concurrent process is complete, a complainant has 12 months to request that their complaint is re-opened.
- 4.10. Complaints are counted in the year in which they were responded to or closed: 2023-24 complaint figures include complaints that will have been initiated in the previous year (2022-23) but then closed in this reporting year.
- 4.11. Withdrawn complaints are still included in the numbers because the issues raised may still result in changes to how a service is delivered for the person named in the complaint or result in wider practice change. Also, withdrawn complaints still take time and resource from the complaints team and services to record, analyse, and resolve.

¹ Fraser competent is a term used to describe a child under 16 who is considered to be of sufficient age and understanding to fully appreciate what is involved in their treatment.

- 4.12. The department commissions its advocacy provision through 'The Advocacy People' to assist children and young people when making a complaint or a representation.

5. Approach to learning from complaints/Quality Assurance

- 5.1. Getting The Best from Complaints (5.7.1) requires local authorities to monitor the operation and effectiveness of their complaints procedures with quality assurance systems that feed complaint outcomes into operational delivery.
- 5.2. The Complaints Manager works closely with the Quality Assurance and Improvement Manager and Head of Participation to discuss learning from complaints on a quarterly basis. Learning is triangulated with the work undertaken by Quality Assurance and fed back to senior managers. This ensures that learning from complaints feeds directly into service improvements within Children's Services.
- 5.3. Case studies are included throughout the report, but in summary, this year key learning focused on:
- **Kind Communication:** Strived to connect better with families, ensuring communication was kind, respectful, and attuned, even during difficult conversations.
 - **Supporting Care Leavers:** Improved work with young people to ensure that they understand the role of Future First and the role of housing and how each of the departments are different, carry out different tasks and have different duties and responsibilities.
 - **Reasonable Adjustments:** Identified and rectified communication gaps by offering interpreter services, ensuring comprehensive understanding for families where English was not the first language, acknowledged the unique challenges of working with individuals with neurodivergence and adapted communication and partnership strategies accordingly.
 - **Father Engagement:** Recognised and promoted the active role of fathers in child and family assessments, fostering their involvement in decision-making processes.
 - **Addressing Domestic Abuse:** Navigated the complexities of domestic abuse allegations by facilitating family meetings and Family Group Conferences, enabling families to find sustainable solutions.
 - **Service Improvement:** Undertook a reflective approach to enhance service delivery, focusing on improved communication, decision-making, and support for disabled children and their families. Prioritised the prompt completion of child and family assessments, providing clear information about available resources for disabled children and their families.

- **Record Keeping:** Emphasised the importance of documenting all conversations and ensuring parents felt heard and taken seriously and that documents and assessments are shared with parents in a timely manner.
- **Direct Payments Process:** Streamlined the Direct Payments process, ensuring clear explanations were provided and enquires followed up.

6. Statutory complaint numbers and representations

6.1. Children’s Services welcomes all feedback, including complaints and representations about its services. Service users, families and carers can provide their views in an open and transparent way and can easily access the complaints procedure.

Table 1: Number of statutory complaints by year

Stage	2020/21 Completed	2020/21 Received	2021/22 Completed	2021/22 Received	2022/23 Completed	2022/23 Received	2023/24 completed	2023/24 received
S1	75	60	68	85	36	36	28	25
S2	10	15	22	20	16	8	6	9
S3	6	7	6	9	10	7	3	4
Total	91	82	96	114	62	51	37	38

6.2. Children’s Services completed 37 statutory complaints in total across all three stages during 2023/24. These are highlighted in **Table 1**. This represents a 40% decrease on the previous year when 62 were completed. Of these complaints, the vast majority 76% (or 28 complaints²) were completed at stage 1. 16% (or 6 complaints³) were completed at stage 2 and 8% (or 3⁴ complaints) progressed and were completed at stage 3.

6.3. Alongside the 37 formal complaints, in liaison with Children’s Social Care teams, the Complaints Team swiftly resolved 12 low level complaints that had the potential to become formal complaints without this intervention.

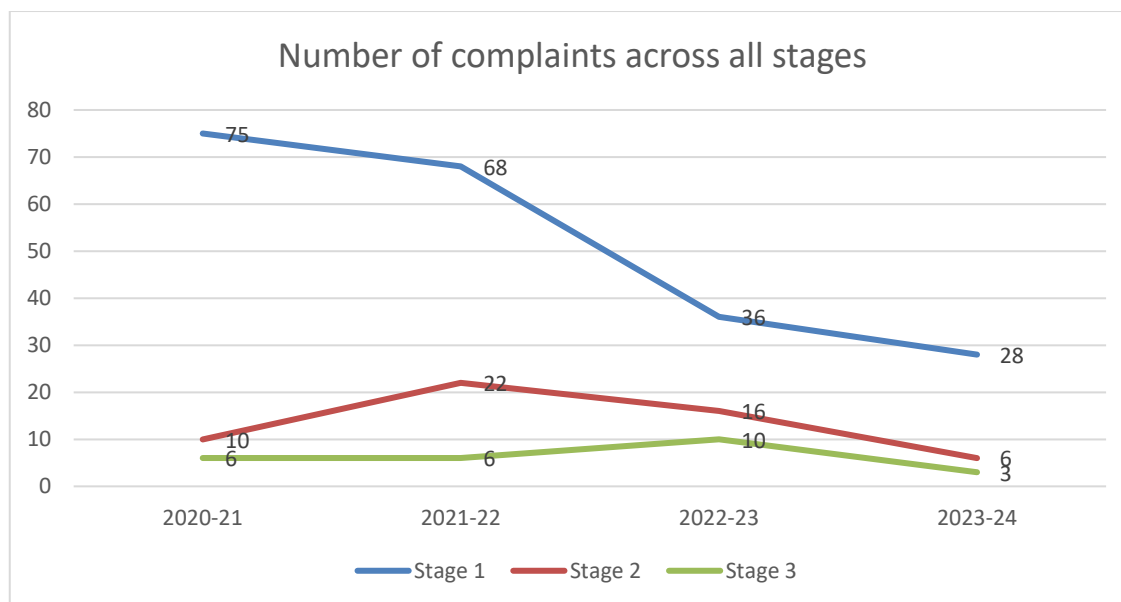
² Whilst 28 Stage 1 complaints were completed, in total 25 new complaints were received. Five Stage 1 complaints from the previous year (2022-23) were carried over and closed during the first and second quarter of this year. Two Stage 1 complaints remain open in Quarter 4 and will be carried over and completed in the first quarter of next year (2024-25).

³ Stage 2 complaints have been logged in the quarter requested by the complainant and closed in the quarter in which the final response was sent. 3 Stage 2 complaints were carried over from the previous year (2022-23) and completed this year. 36 Stage 2 complaints remain open in Quarter 4 and will be carried over and completed next year (2024-25).

⁴ Stage 3 complaints have been logged in the quarter requested by the complainant and closed in the quarter in which the final response was sent. One Stage 3 complaints was carried over from the previous year (2022-23) and completed this year. One Stage 3 complaints remain open in Quarter 4 and will be carried over and completed next year (2024-25).

- 6.4. The reduction in complaints should be considered in the context of the overall number of representations dealt with by the Complaints Team during this year. These are set out in Table 3, and whilst only 37 complaints were dealt with as statutory complaints, the Complaints Team dealt with an additional 102 issues and enquiries on behalf of Wandsworth Children’s Services.
- 6.5. The volume of complaints should also be set in context by looking at the overall level of contact and interaction Children’s Services has with partners, residents and service users. The 28 stage 1 complaints completed this year is a low proportion, given that the department handled 12,995⁵ front door contacts from partners, agencies and families of which 1,833 resulted in social care referrals, 1,370 social care assessments were undertaken, and 479 new Section 47 (Child Protection) enquires were instigated.
- 6.6. The continual decrease in statutory complaints could also be positively impacted in the reduction of young people being supported. For example, last year there were 900 new Section 47 (Child Protection) enquiries, but this year only 479 which is a 47% decrease. As a high number of complaints are from parents/guardians whose families are subject to Child Protection enquiries, this overall reduction will have impacted on statutory complaint numbers. Additionally, turnover rate for social workers has more than halved leading to greater continuity for families; in 2023, agency workers only accounted for 18.6% of the workforce.

Chart 1: Number of statutory complaints by year and stage



- 6.7. Overall, the proportion of complaints completed at stage 1 has decreased by 22% this year (8 complaints). However, 11 complaints for Children’s Social Care were triaged through the Corporate Complaints Process following assessment by the Statutory Complaints Manager.

⁵ Last year’s numbers: 15,166 front door contacts, 2,2448 social care referrals, 2,220 social care assessments, 900 new Section 47 enquiries

6.8. Complaints at stage 2 have decreased by 63% in line with the gradual decrease in stage 1 complaints and stage 3 complaints have decreased by 70%.

Table 2: Number of statutory complaints completed by quarter: 2023-24

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total completed
Stage 1	4	9	10	5	28
Stage 2	2	0	0	4	6
Stage 3	0	1	1	1	3
Total	6	10	11	10	37

6.9. When looking at the complaint figures in context, it is notable that Wandsworth Children’s Services responded to 217 Member enquiries⁶ this year in addition to the formal complaints: across both Education and Children’s Services. Member enquiries, either through local MPs or Councillors are another way for residents or service users to give feedback or raise concerns about service provision, some of which could have been considered through complaint processes.

6.10. Whilst Member enquiries can be requests for information or service enquiries, rather than formal complaints, it is important that these figures are considered alongside the number of complaints as managers are also expected to investigate the issues and provide response, often within shorter timescales than those prescribed by complaint processes.

6.11. In addition to the 37 formal complaints, during the year the Complaints Team dealt with an additional 102 enquiries and representations over a wide range of issues or concerns that did not fit within the remit of the statutory complaints process. This means that over the year, the Complaints Team handled 139 issues for Children’s Services.

6.12. Representations are low level complaint matters that have been resolved informally and quickly to prevent escalation to the formal complaints process. Issues or concerns are other matters that residents have sent directly to the Complaints Team for triaging, signposting, or redirecting to another team or process, for example, school complaints or safeguarding issues. These numbers are included in **table 3** below to demonstrate the breadth of the work undertaken by the Complaints Team alongside the formal complaints completed through the statutory complaints process this year.

⁶ Last year Children’s Services responded to 180 Member Enquiries.

Table 3: Representations, issues or concerns handled by the Complaints Team in 2023-24

Type of case	Number
Formal Complaints completed through the Statutory complaints process	37
Representations: low level complaints sent to services for quick resolution	12
Statutory complaint requests rejected (redirected) or no consent	3
Non-statutory complaints/issues passed to other services or directorates	26
Complaints specifically about schools/early years provision (re-directed to school complaints processes)	26
Issues for external partners/agencies	2
Data Protection/FOI requests/Right to Rectification, redirected to Information Governance Processes	15
Safeguarding issues	5
Historical abuse	1
Complainant disengaged	12
TOTAL number of cases handled by the complaints team this year (includes the 37 formal complaints)	139

Case Study: Enhancing Father Involvement in Child and Family Assessments (stage 1)

Background: A complaint was raised by a father regarding the perceived bias towards them during the child and family assessment process. Whilst this case was complicated by allegations of domestic abuse, the complaint investigation highlighted the importance of ensuring the active involvement of fathers in child and family assessments and that children's social care are committed to supporting children within their families of origin, which includes engaging fathers to enhance children's sense of identity, belonging, and development.

Learning: There were several learnings from the case which were disseminated to teams:

Father Engagement: Fathers should be actively involved in discussions about concerns pertaining to their children. This engagement is crucial for fostering stronger father-child relationships.

Information Sharing: Transparency in our processes is key. We must share assessment reports with both fathers and mothers, allowing them the opportunity to provide feedback.

Comprehensive Reporting: Assessment reports should reflect the perspectives of all relevant family members, demonstrate a thorough analysis of the collected information, and outline clear, outcome-focused plans that are executed promptly.

Addressing Concerns: When fathers express concerns about their children's welfare, it is our duty to investigate thoroughly and provide parents with conclusive feedback.

7. Complaints by service area and teams

- 7.1 The Family Safeguarding and Disabled Children's Service, which covers Child in Need, Child Protection and Disabled Children, investigated and completed 16 stage 1 complaints (57%). The social care teams always strive to resolve concerns quickly which at times avoids the need for young people and families to make a formal complaint which is reflected in the lower numbers.
- 7.2 The Advice, Support and Help service which covers the Brief Intervention Service and MASH, completed seven stage 1 complaints (or 25%). The Children Looked After service completed five stage 1 complaints (18%). **Chart 2** illustrates the number of complaints by service area and stage.
- 7.3 At stage 2 and 3, most complaints were completed by the Advice, Support and Help service (four stage 2 complaints and one stage 3 complaints). The Children Looked After service completed two stage 2 complaints and two stage 3 complaints. The Family Safeguarding and Disabled Children's Service completed one stage 2 complaint and no stage 3 complaints.

Chart 2: Number of statutory complaints by service area and stage 2023/24

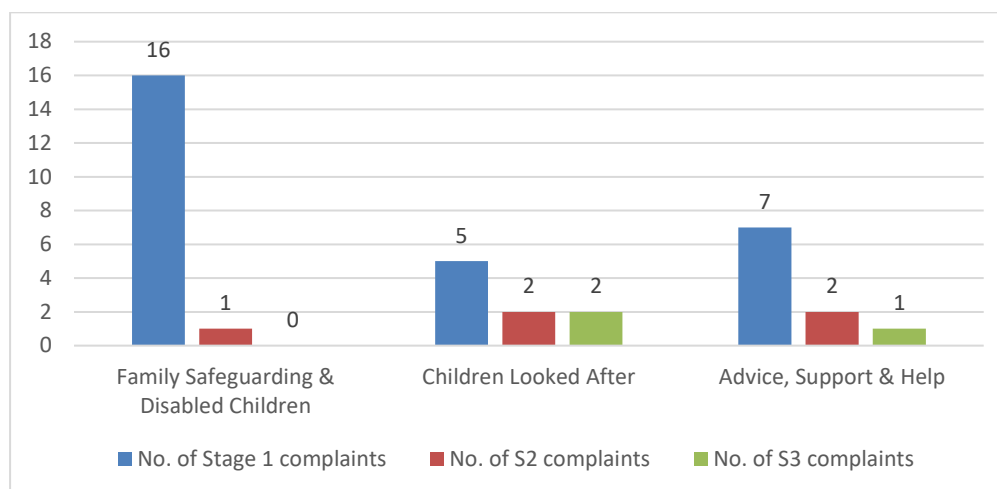


Table 4: Stage 1 statutory complaints completed by service area and team 2023-24

Service Area	Team	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
Children Looked After (CLA)	Future First	0	1	2	1	4
	CLA locality teams	0	1	0	0	1
Family Safeguarding and Disabled Children’s service	Family Safeguarding (includes Child in Need and Child Protection)	3	2	7	3	15
	Disabled Children	0	1	0	0	1
Advice, Support and Help Service/	Brief Intervention Service	1	4	1	1	7
TOTAL		4	9	9		28

8. Complaints by issues and outcomes: Stage 1

8.1 Complaint issues allow us to understand how services are being perceived and what can be learnt from complaints to improve service provision. Complaints are regularly reviewed at senior management level with a primary focus on addressing the learning from complaints which are upheld or partially upheld. Most complaints are multi-faceted and therefore raise multiple issues. For example, whilst communication as a principal issue was only recorded five times, most complaints raise communication issues in some way, but this may not be the main motivation to complain. Therefore,

each complaint has been reported by its principal issue, which is the overarching theme or trigger of the complaint and full data on all the complaint issues raised this year is provided further on in section 8.

- 8.2 When broken down by the top 5 principal issues raised, the most frequently raised principal issue at stage 1 was **lack of support** which accounted for 25% (7) of complaints (or 7 complaints). Then, **quality of assessment** accounted for 18% or 5 complaints (or 5 complaints), followed by **delays in service** 14% (or 4 complaints), **placement issues** also at 14% (or 4 complaints) and then **staff behaviour** which accounted for 11% respectively (or 3 complaints). Principal issues and times upheld/partly upheld are highlighted in **Chart 3**.
- 8.3 Whilst overall, numbers are low for the top 5 principal issues of complaint, these issues were raised 48 times overall which is set out in chart 5. Themes from complaints raising these issues have been summarised as:

- **Lack of Support:** Themes included perceptions of insufficient support for transitioning to adulthood and from Future First who support care leavers. Delays in arranging services such as holiday activities and respite care have also led to perceptions of lack of support from families.
- **Quality of Assessment:** Parents raised concerns about perceived bias in child protection assessments and disagreements with professional opinions within assessment reports. There were also complaints about risk assessments not being shared with parents and dissatisfaction with the level of communication from social workers during the assessment process.
- **Delays in Service:** Themes included delays in support package funds which impacted the arrangement of respite care, delays in arranging activities for children and delays in arranging respite care itself.
- **Placement Issues:** Concerns included disputes over child placements, concerns about the suitability of placements, and the perceptions by parents of lack of support for children in care.
- **Staff Behaviour:** Complaints were about perceptions of being treated disrespectfully by staff, a perceived lack of care and dismissive attitude from social services regarding incidents, and dissatisfaction with the approach of social workers involved with families

Chart 3 – Number of statutory complaints received by principal Issue at stage 1 and number of times upheld/partially upheld 2023-24

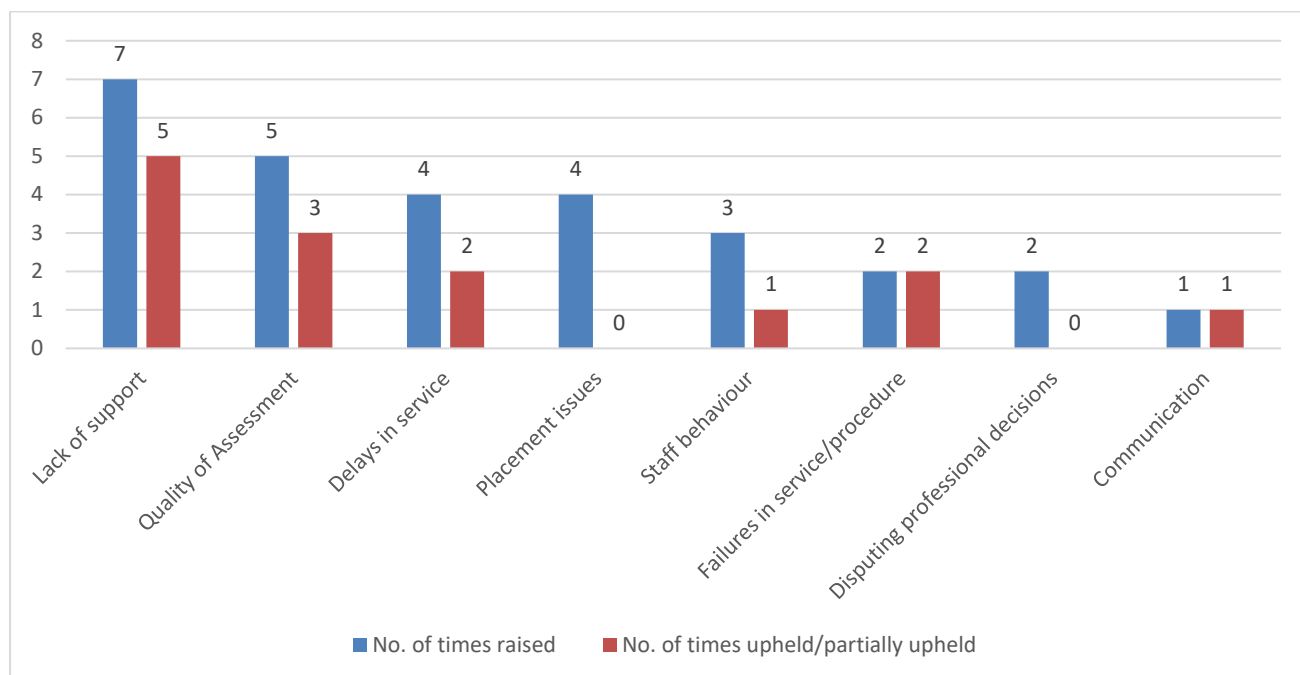
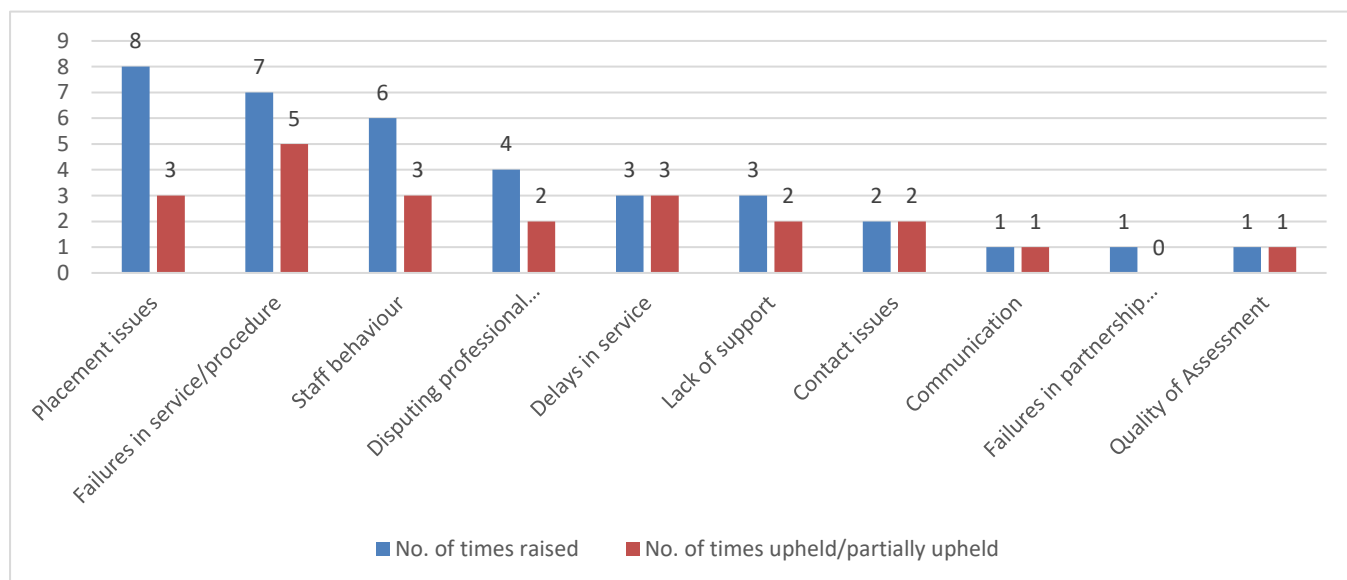


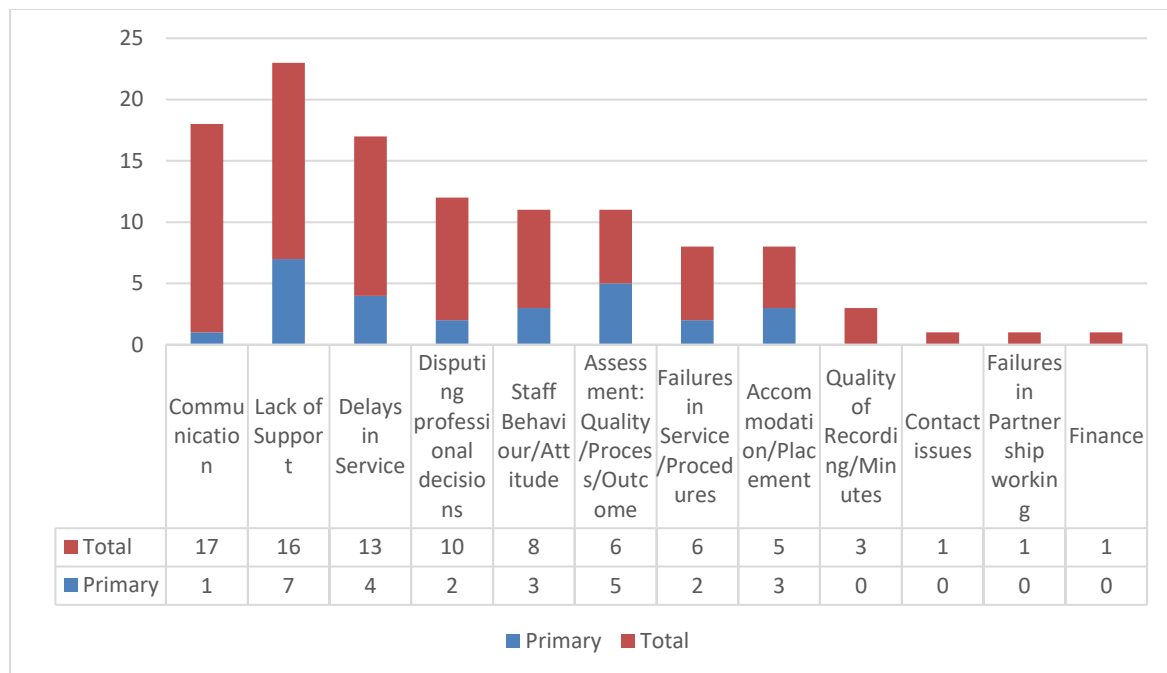
Chart 4 – Number of statutory complaints received by principal Issue at stage 1 and number of times upheld/partially upheld 2022-23



8.9 Whilst **Chart 3** has set out the principal issues for each stage 1 complaint, **Chart 5** below sets out each issue raised within the 28 stage 1 complaints. Across the 28 stage 1 complaints a total of 87 issues were raised, demonstrating the complexity of children’s statutory complaints. This can present a challenging in determining the key

motivation for making the complaint, as often issues like communication and delays are a thread through an entire complaint, yet the complainant’s desired outcome is, for example, to have an assessment amended or a professional decision changed.

Chart 5: Full data on the issues raised from the 28 statutory stage 1 complaints 2023-24



8.10 With regards to complaint outcomes, as demonstrated in **Chart 6** and **Table 6** below, at stage 1, not upheld complaints accounted for 50% (compared to 33% last year) partly upheld complaints account for 43% (compared to 50% last year) and fully upheld accounted for 7% (compared to 8%) last year.

Chart 6: Outcome by % statutory stage 1 complaints 2023-24

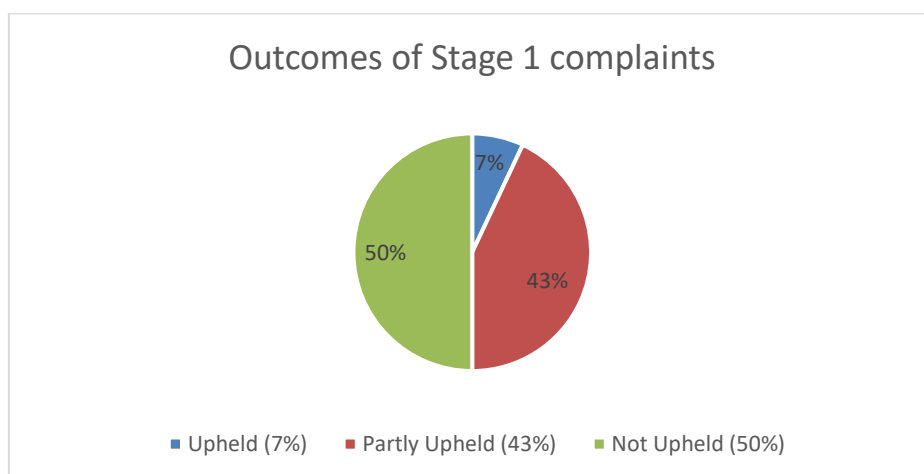


Table 7: statutory stage 1 complaint outcomes 2023/24

Outcome	Total number	Percentage (out of 38)
Not Upheld	14	50%
Partly Upheld	12	43%
Upheld	2	7%
	28	

Case Study: Enhancing Support for Families with Disabled Children (stage 1)

Background: A parent made a complaint that their young disabled child had not received short breaks as per their EHCP plan. The proposed plan included 3 hours of weekly short breaks (respite care), with a family member as the caregiver. However, the family member was deemed too young for the role, leading to delay in the exploration of alternative options, such as club-based respite. Despite these efforts, at the time of complaining, the family had yet to receive the agreed-upon short break services, resulting in additional administrative burdens and emotional distress.

Learning: Several key learning points have emerged from the services provided to the family and their child and highlights the necessity for efficient processes and clear communication within support services for families with disabled children. Learning evidenced that child and family assessments must be conducted promptly. Moreover, parents of a disabled children, would benefit from clearer information regarding available support resources for enjoyable short breaks. To address these issues, the service manager reinforced the importance of timely assessments and transparent communication about support resources in team meetings. These points were also emphasized during individual supervision sessions with Team Managers.

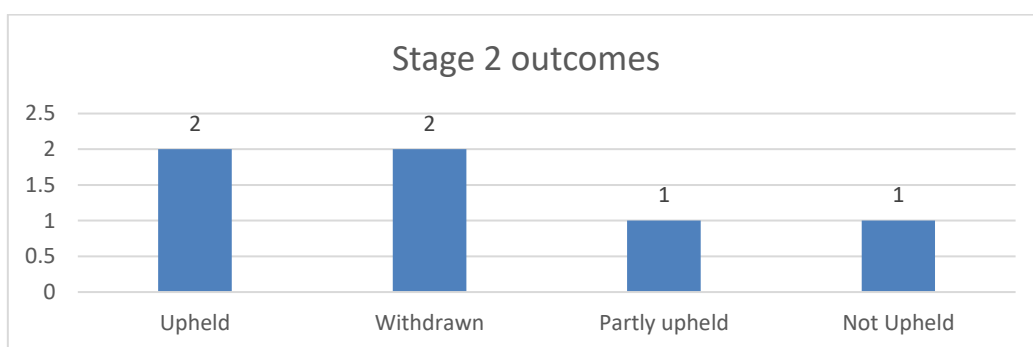
9. Complaints by issue and outcomes: Stage 2

- 9.1 At the start of the stage 2 process a statement of complaint is agreed with an independent officer and independent person. The date the statement is signed commences the start of the 65 working day timescale. As stage 2 investigations are detailed and cover multiple issues, it is to be expected that most complaints are partly upheld, and it is difficult to determine one principal theme of complaint
- 9.2 In total 6 complaints escalated to stage 2 this year; 2 of these were withdrawn after the process had started⁷.
- 9.3 Of the 6 Stage 2 complaints, 4 were raised by parents or guardians and 2 were directly from young people who are care leavers. 2 of the complaints raised by parents with withdrawn after the process had started.

⁷ The 2 withdrawn stage 2 complaints were for Advice, Help and Support.

- 9.4 The 2 complaints from young people who are care leavers raised issues about the level of support and communication from their Personal Advisor, being unhappy with where they were placed and requiring more support available with registering for fully independent housing. One of these complaints is explored further in the case study on **page 18**.
- 9.5 The remaining 2 complaints from parents were about delays in advocacy support for a disabled child with an EHCP and a father who was unhappy with that the MASH team would not share information about his family when they moved out of borough after a safeguarding incident.
- 9.6 The learning from the advocacy complaint was in relation to the complaints statutory complaints process and the Council’s response confirmed that they Council is implementing a new case management system which will track and monitor the performance of complaints handling and has commissioned a consortium to provide complaint specialists to fulfil the independent roles required at stage 2 and 3 of the statutory process. The use of the consortium is intended to deliver a consistent approach as well as good quality reports and improve the communication between investigators and complainants and ensure that timescales are met.
- 9.7 The complaint from the parent in relation to MASH highlighted a number of learning areas to understand a non-residential father’s position The Information Governance Team were invited to a MASH Team meeting to clarify roles and responsibilities in sharing information with non-resident fathers particularly when cases are being transferred to other Local Authorities. Additionally, when a parent is unhappy with a response from MASH, the standard practice will be to meet with them, understand their concerns, and agree on a way forward.

Chart 7: statutory stage 2 outcomes 2023/24



Case Study: Pathway Plan (stage 2)

Background: The case study revolves around the grievances expressed by a care leaver, who raised concerns regarding the accommodation provided to them and their young child by the Local Authority. Their dissatisfaction stemmed from a perceived lack of consideration for their preferences, feelings of surveillance, lack of privacy, and the distant location from their support network.

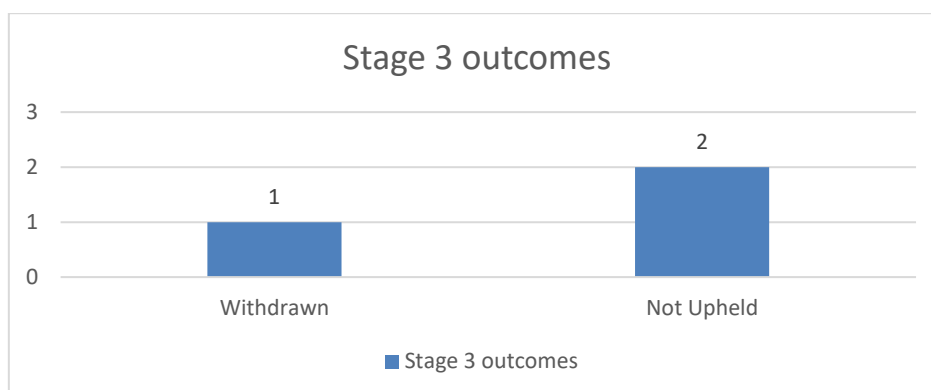
The investigation largely did not substantiate the complaint, revealing substantial evidence that the young person's opinions were indeed considered. Nonetheless, it was recognised that their pathway plan lacked clear timelines, particularly concerning a social housing application process, which was not initiated in a timely manner. This aspect was partially upheld. The Independent Investigator recommended that the council acknowledge the lessons learned during the investigation, issue an apology, and ensure that the young person's pathway plan includes a definitive timeline for their housing pathway to provide them with assurance of eventual independent living.

Learning: The case study highlighted the importance of effective communication with young adults transitioning from care, particularly concerning their semi-independent and independent living options. In response, a guide has been developed to aid clarity around available options, necessary actions, and expected waiting periods.

10. Complaints by issue and outcomes: Stage 3

- 10.1 This year 3 complaints escalated to stage 3 which is 70% lower than the 10 complaints last year. Of these, 1 were withdrawn as the complainants decided not to pursue their complaint.
- 10.2 Both of the stage 3 complaints that went to Panel were made by young people who are care leavers. This is positive, as last year, none of the stage 3 complaints were made by young people.
- 10.3 Both complaints were about support from Future First. One complaint was from a young person who was unhappy with the support from their Personal Advisor, and the other was from a young person who felt like their pathway plan was inadequate. A case study from one of the complaints is on the following page.

Chart 8: Statutory stage 3 outcomes 2023/24



Learning Case study: Pathway Plan (Stage 3)

Background

A young person leaving care escalated their complaint to a Stage 3 Panel. The complaint was about the support they received from Future First in their Pathway Plan. Their primary concerns were related to education and housing. They felt that upon turning 21, Future First did not provide adequate support or financial assistance. The Stage 3 Panel report acknowledged the limitations of the current system and the scarcity of resources. However, it also suggested that future improvements could include greater flexibility and sensitivity to the needs of young care leavers, particularly those in education. Despite this the Panel concluded that the service had adhered to its policies in helping the young person achieve stable accommodation.

Learning

The complaint was specifically upheld in relation to:

- The failure to specify the proposed level of contact from the young person’s Personal Advisor.
- Minor inaccuracies in a report regarding the educational course the young person was taking.
- Lack of clarity on whether the Authority supported the young person continuing with their educational course.

The Stage 3 response highlighted important lessons from the young person’s experiences, particularly around communication and clarity in Pathway Plans. These insights, including the observations of the Panel, were communicated back to the service for future improvement.

11. Response times

Stage 1

11.1 Stage 1 complaints should be investigated and completed within a timescale of 10 working days. This can be extended up to 20 working days for more complex complaints or in other instances where an extension is agreed by the Complaints Manager. From the 28 completed stage 1 complaints, 21 were completed within the statutory time frame which allows a maximum of 20 working days.

Chart 9– Stage 1 response times – complaints completed during 2023-24

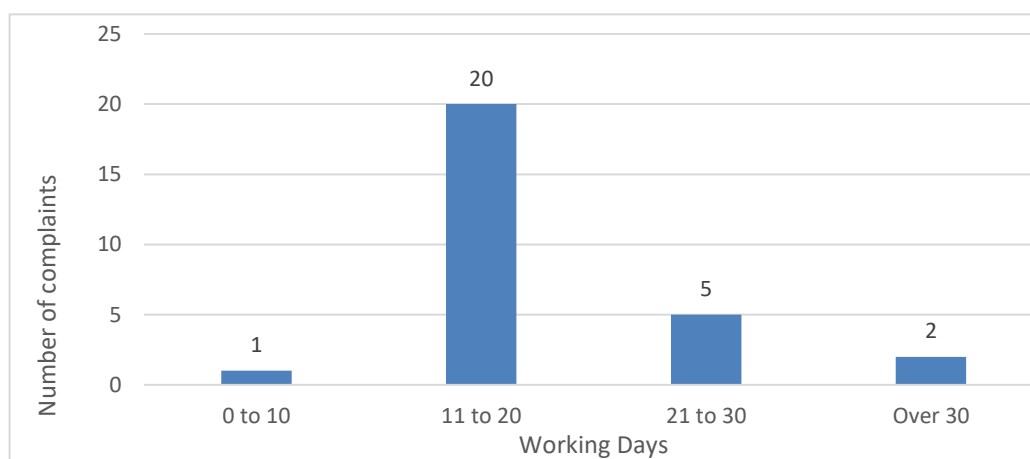
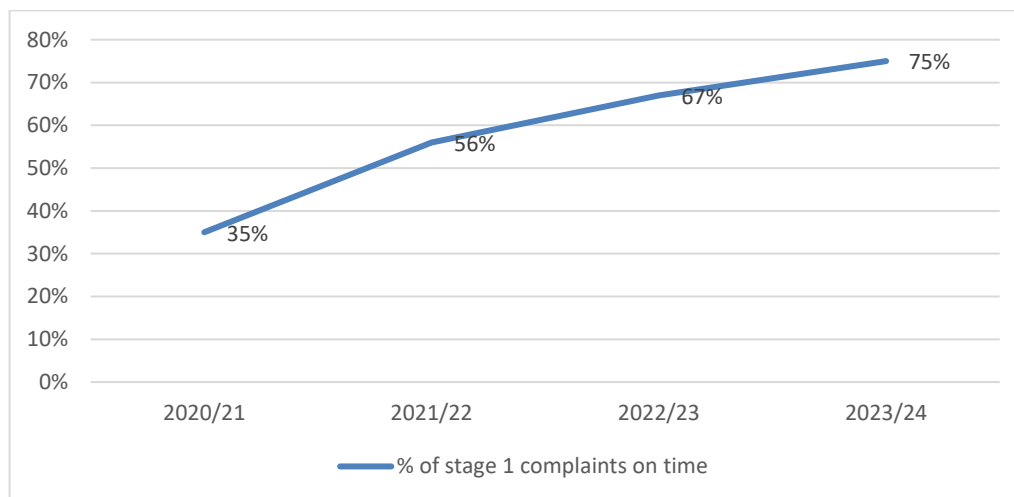


Chart 10: % of stage 1 statutory complaints on time 2020/21 – 2023/24



11.3 75% (20) stage 1 complaints received a response on time which is shown on **Chart 8**. This is an improvement on the 67% completed on time in 2022-23 and 56% in 2021-22, although the number of stage 1 complaints has also reduced. The Complaints Team support Children’s Services by quality assuring all complaint responses and producing high quality bi-weekly complaint tracker reports, which is a reliable system to remind managers of complaint deadlines.

Stage 2

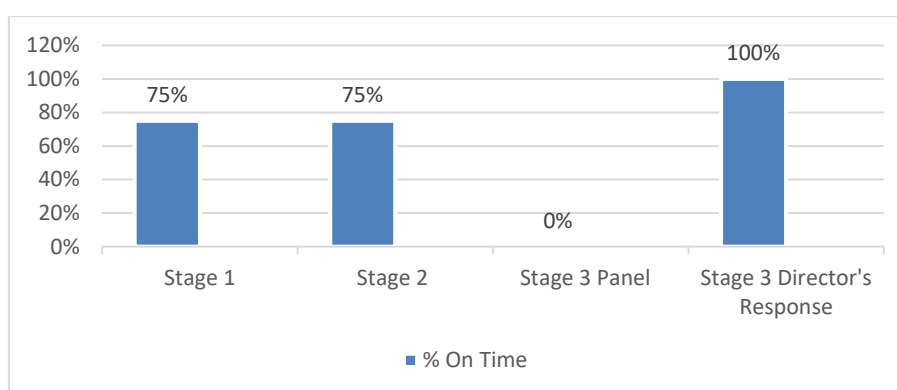
11.4 Stage 2 complaints have a statutory timescale of 25 to 65 working days. Two stage 2 complaints were withdrawn part way through the process. Excluding these, three of the four stage 2 complaints that were fully concluded, were completed with 65 working days. The complaint that was completed late, was finalised within 71 working days.

Stage 3

11.5 Stage 3 panels must be held within 30 working days of the request and the panel report sent to the complainant within five working days of the panel. The Director’s response should be sent no later than 15 working days after the panel report is received. This year one stage 3 complaint was withdrawn before the panel was held. Of the remaining two stage 3 complaints, neither of the panels were held on time. However, in both cases, the Director’s report, which is sent within 15 working days of the panel report being received, were sent on time.

11.6 It continues to be a challenge to hold stage 2 panels within the prescribed 30-day timescale. This is mainly due to the availability of independent panel members and at time, complainants.

Chart 11: Percentage of statutory complaints completed on time at all stages 2023-24



12. Young people’s complaints

12.1 Of the 28 stage 1 complaints completed for this reporting period, just over three quarters (82% or 23 complaints) of Stage 1 complaints were received on behalf of parents or carers. One complaint (or 4%) was received from a family member. The remaining 4 (or 14%) complaints were received directly from a child/young person. This is a 43% decrease on the 7 complaints directly from young people last year

(2022-23) and is 75% less than the previous year (2021-22) where 16 complaints were made by young people.

12.2 Additionally, two of the stage 2 complaints from young people that had raised complaints at stage 1. Two were received for Stage 3.

12.3 Of the complaints received from young people across all 3 stages⁸:

- 71%% (or five) were from young females and 29% (or two) were from young males
- 100% (or 7) were from young people aged between 18-24. No complaints were received from children under 18.
- 100% (or 7) of complaints were from Care Leavers.

12.4 The Complaints Team are always keen to receive complaints from children and young people directly. If it is considered that a complaint is best made from a children or young person, we aim to work directly with them and always offer advocacy support.

12.7 The main themes emerging from complaints received directly from young people during this reporting period is placement issues. These were summarised in **Section 6** of the report.

13. Complaints by category of support and equalities breakdown

13.1 The following section reviews the breakdown of complaints completed at stage 1 by the category of support that the young people have received. The section will then go onto review the breakdown of equalities data of these young people.

Table 7: number of stage 1 statutory complaints completed by category of support 2023/24

Category of support	No. of complaints	%
Children in Need	9	32%
Child Protection	7	25%
Care Leavers	4	14%
MASH/brief intervention stage/ Early Intervention	4	14%
Disabled Children	2	7%
Children Looked After	1	4%
Unknown	1	4%
Total	28	100%

⁸ Where a young person has escalated their complaint to stage 2 and 3 of the complaints process, they have only been counted once.

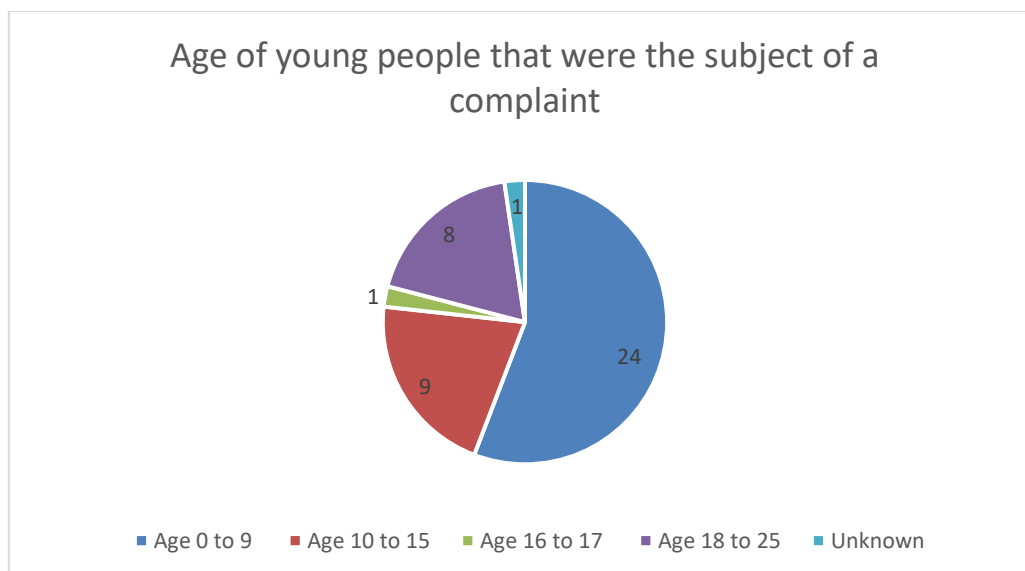
13.2 **Table 7** above demonstrates the number of completed stage 1 complaints split by category of support. Whilst most complaints concerned Children in Need or those subject to Child Protection, the numbers are fairly level across all types of support.

13.3 The volume of these complaints should be taken in the context of the overall level of interaction as of 31st March 2024 there were just 79 children on an open Child Protection plan, 218 open Looked after Children, and 1,681 Children in Need (including open assessments)⁹.

13.4 Whilst 37 complaints were completed across all stages, some complaints concerned families with multiple children, and others featured across multiple stages of the process and were only recorded once. Therefore, the total number of children for which equalities data is recorded against in the charts below is 43.

13.5 Chart 13 below sets out the age range of children and young people subject of a complaint. Most complaints concerned children aged 0 to 9 years (24 children), followed by children between 10-15 years of age (9 children). Whilst less complaints were received concerning older children, one young person aged 16-17 were the subject of a complaint and a further eight were aged 18 to 25. The complaints received directly from children tended to be from older children. The age of one child concerned in complaints were unknown.

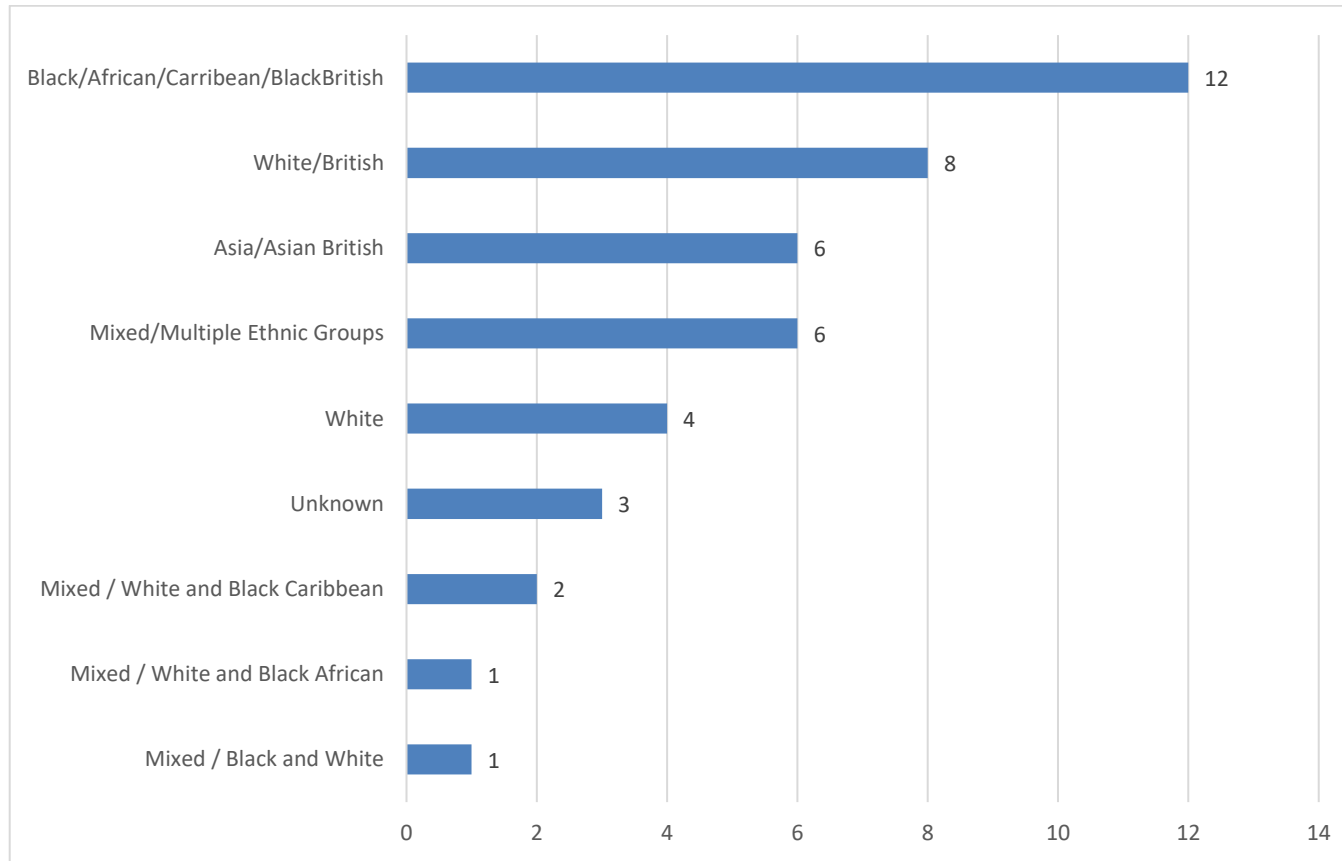
Chart 13: Age range of the 43 young people subject of a statutory complaint



13.7 There were equally 21 (48%) young females and 21 (48%) young males subject of a complaint. One child the complaints concerned gender was unknown.

⁹ This compares to 182 children on an open Child Protection Plan, 237 Looked After Children and 1,997 Children in Need as of 31st March 2023

Chart 14: Ethnicity of the 43 young people that were the subject of a statutory complaint

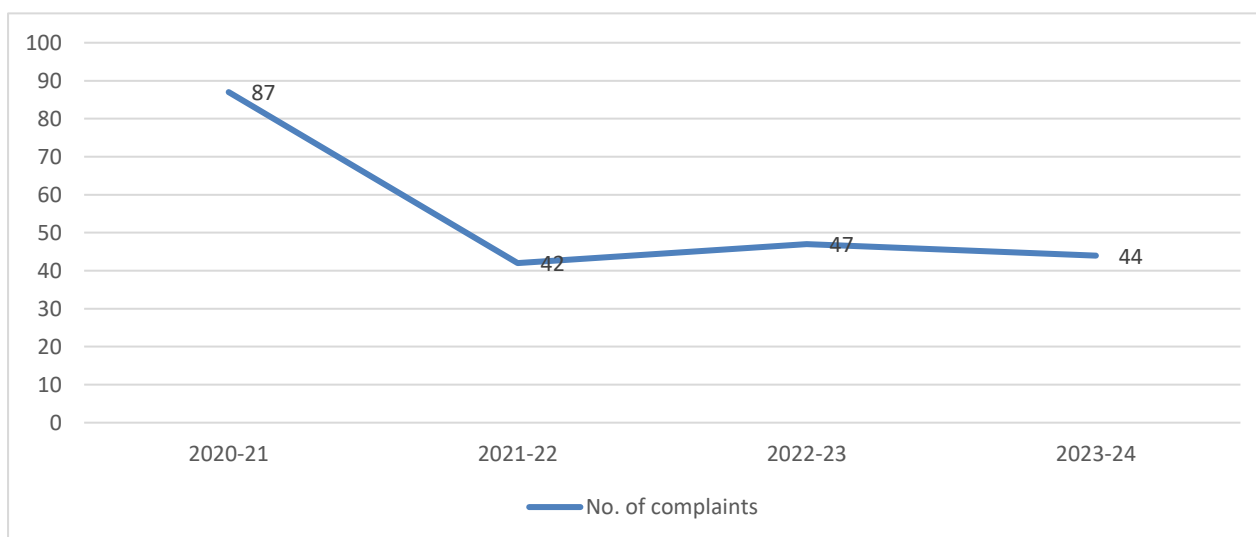


14 Corporate complaints

14.1 This report provides a brief overview of Corporate Complaints closed by Children’s Services and includes numbers for both social care and education. Detailed reporting on Corporate Complaints is within Richmond Council’s Corporate Complaints Report 2023-24.

14.2 Children’s Services completed 44 stage 1 corporate complaints which is 6% lower than 47 stage 1 corporate complaints completed last year and 7% higher than the 42 completed in 2021/22. The trajectory has been a general decrease in stage 1 corporate complaints which is in line with the overall reduction in statutory stage 1 complaints.

Chart 14: Number of stage 1 corporate complaints 2020-21 to 2023/24



14.3 Of the 44 stage 1 complaints:

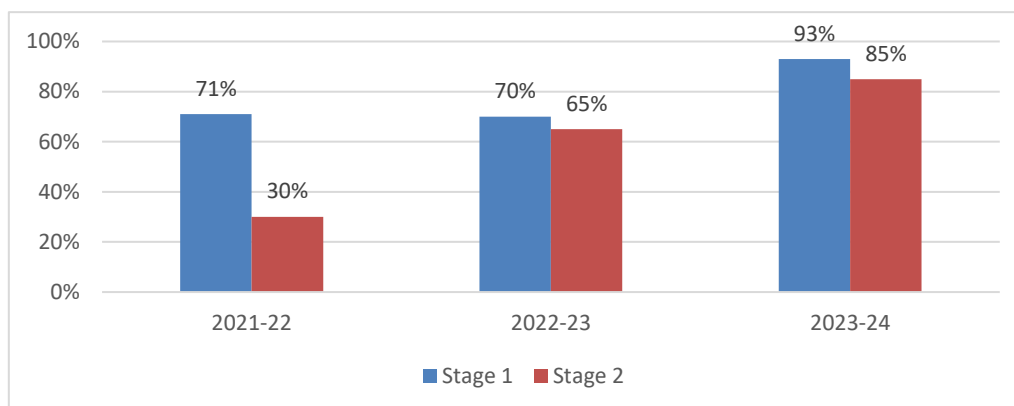
- 27 were for SEND/Education which is a 25% reduction on the 36 last year. Of the 27 complaints, 17 were specifically related to ECHP provision.
- 11 were for Children’s Social Care which is a 120% increase on the 5 last year. This is a direct result of triaging decisions made by the Complaints Manager to ensure that social complaints are dealt with through the correct complaints process¹⁰. This has directly impacted on the reduction in statutory complaints detailed towards the start of the report.
- 1 complaint was for Early Help which is the same as last year.
- 5 complaints were for Business Resources which is the same as last year.

¹⁰ Some parts of the 1988 Children’s Act are excluded from the Children’s Statutory Complaint Regulations. Sometimes the Complaints Team assess that it is correct to investigate these through the Council’s own Corporate Complaints Procedure. Also, sometimes parents or adults without parental responsibility, make complaints about how the actions of Children’s Social Care have impacted them personally. These complaints, which are not child centred, are investigated through the non-statutory complaints route.

14.4 This year 20 complaints (45%) escalated to stage 2 which is slightly higher than the 17 complaints (36%) last year.

14.5 Performance against timescales is extremely high and increasing each year. 93% (41) of stage 1 complaints were sent out on time, which is 20 working days. 85% of stage 2 complaints were sent out.

Chart 15: Number of stage 1 and 2 corporate complaints completed on time 2022-23 to 2023-24



15 Ombudsman Cases

15.1 This report provides a brief overview of Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) closed by Children's Services. Detailed reporting on Corporate and Ombudsman Complaints across all services is within Wandsworth Council's Corporate Complaints Report 2023-24.

15.2 A complainant has the right to refer their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSO) at any time. Generally, the Ombudsman will seek to ensure that the Local Authority has been provided with the opportunity to first respond to the complaint in accordance with the Council's own statutory complaints process.

15.3 During 2023/24, there were 13 complaints made to the Ombudsman about Wandsworth Children's Service with is 13% less than the 15 Ombudsman last year. 4 of these were for statutory children's services and 9 were for education/SEND¹¹. It is positive that the number of complaints being referred to the Ombudsman have reduced.

¹¹ Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND). A child or young person who has special educational needs and/or a disability and needs special health and education support.

15.4 For Children's Services, only 1 of the 4 complaints resulted in a full investigation and no fault was found. For Education, 4 of the enquiries resulted in a full investigation and fault was found in 3 cases. More detail is provided in **Table 6**.

15.5 Statutory Ombudsman cases (Children's Services)

Quarter	Service Area	Details	Outcome
1	Referral & Assessment	Complaint that the Council gave the wrong information in Court.	The LGSCO cannot investigate Court matters.
1	Child in Need	Felt that the Council had not involved them in decisions about their child.	The LGSCO decided not to investigate the complaint.
2	Safeguarding/Complaints Team	Complaint that a request for a Stage 3 Complaints Panel was refused	The LGSCO investigated and found that the Council was not at fault
3	Children Looked After	About errors in a social care assessment.	The LGSCO determined the complaint was premature

15.6 Non-statutory Ombudsman cases (Education)

Table 8: Ombudsman enquiries/investigations and outcomes: Education

Quarter	Service Area	Details	Outcome
1	School Transport	Complaint about how the Council considered an appeal for free school transport.	The LGSCO investigated and found the Council at fault in how it recorded the appeal panel finding in the outcome letter. The Council agreed to make service improvements.
1	SEND	Complained that the Council had appropriately responded to complaints in line with the complaint's procedure.	The LGSCO did not investigate as the issues related to school issues.
1	SEND	Unhappy with services agreed as part of the EHCP	The LGSCO did not investigate as it was reasonable for the parent to

			use the Tribunal process.
2	SEND	Not providing support as stated in the EHCP	The LGSCO investigated and found fault. The Council apologised, provided a financial remedy and agreed to make service improvements.
2	SEND	Complaint about an unamended ECHP and request for an independent decision to inform a school placement	The LGSCO did not investigate the complaint as the complainant has used their right to go through the Appeal's process.
3	Pupil Services	Complaint that a young person out of school is not receiving any education.	The LGSCO determined the complaint was premature.
3	SEND	Complaint that fault on the part of the Council caused a young person to miss 1 year of education.	The LGSCO did not investigate as they considered the complaint out of time.
4	EECP ¹²	Errors in Early Years funding and clawing back an overpayment which caused distress to the complainant. the correct funding is provided to a nursery.	The LGSCO investigated and found fault and the Council apologised and reimbursed the complainant.
4	School Transport	The Council did not provide a refund for Uber fares for home to school transport.	The LGSCO investigated and did not find any fault with the Council's actions.

16 Compliments

16.1 Positive feedback regarding staff or service delivery is another way in which the department can learn how well things are going. Compliments remind us of the excellent practice within services and reinforce that the promises made to learn from complaints are sincere. Staff are reminded to report compliments they receive so

¹² Early Education and Childcare Places service

we can record as much positive feedback as possible to evidence the commitment to good social care practice.

16.2 Examples of compliments received from both service users and partner organisations are outlined below:

- *"I just want to thank you [name], you have helped me a lot and you show me that you are happy for me. [name] is always available for me, if I need, and she is honest with the plans. She is just really helpful, and we have a great relationship."* (care experienced young person)
- *"I've had a very good experience with Future First as a whole. I've received lots of support with housing, booking and funding my exams and more recently being allocated to a mentor to help increase my confidence in deciding the right next steps for me. I find it easy to have contact with my PA when necessary and feel like my needs are heard. Thank you."* (Care experienced young person)
- *"I have an open and trusting relationship with [Social Worker] and the rest of the network of professionals who are involved with me and my daughter. I have found the involvement of these professionals supportive more than I ever had in the past... I am definitely 100% involved in making the plans for me and my daughter. I am listened to by the professional network I trust their advice and feel open to share my thoughts with them."* (Care experienced Mother whose child is being supported through a Child in Need Plan).
- *"Since [Social Worker] has started working with us, she has always been kind. She has time and makes me feel like she wants to support us. I do not feel like I am a burden on her. There is nothing too much for her to support us with. I feel very lucky to have her. I was apprehensive when the previous social worker left but I am so grateful for [Social Worker]."*- (Grandmother whose grandchildren are in her care as their Special Guardian)
- *"I trust him (Social Worker). I don't trust many people, it's taken a while to develop that. He has my children's best interests at heart, I know he does. He's helpful."* (Father whose children are being supported through a Child in Need plan)
- *"(Social Worker) listens and greatly understands the challenges I face. Over time we've formed a special bond between us which makes it easier for me to speak up, sad issues become lighter when I speak to (Social Worker). It is a great pleasure having (Social Worker) as my social worker."* (Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young Person who is looked after)

17 Going forward: key achievements and priorities for 2023/24

17.1 The Complaints Team have made significant strides in improving our complaints handling process this year by:

- **Creation of a public-facing Adult Social Care complaints policy:** This new policy aims to provide more transparency about how decisions are made by the Complaints Team and how statutory regulations interact with other policies and procedures.
- **Strengthened quarterly reporting:** To foster a positive culture of learning from complaints, we have enhanced reporting to all council's Senior Management Teams. We also plan to produce six-monthly complaints report for the Director's Board in addition to the annual report.
- **Targeted collaborative work with the Housing Directorate:** In response to an increase in housing-related complaints, we have implemented a procedure to identify high-risk issues and themes. We've also strengthened partnership working between housing and social care teams for more cohesive complaints handling.
- **Collaboration with the SEND teams in Achieving for Children:** Fortnightly meetings now take place to discuss current open complaints and provide support and guidance for the most complex cases. This has also significantly improved the number of complaints sent on time.
- **Work to strengthen complaints practice and culture:** In consideration of the LGSCO and HOS Joint Complaints Handling Code, we have begun work to enhance complaints practice. This included amending timescales for Corporate Complaints under the HOS jurisdiction to commence on 1st April 2024, updating staff guidance on effective complaints handling, and updating information on the Council's complaints webpage.
- **Continued comprehensive complaints training for staff:** This has included regular online training including a webinar on complaints handling, face-to-face complaints training at an Adult Social Worker Forum and securing information about the complaint processes on staff induction for all new starters.

17.2 In 2024-25 our priorities will be:

- **Policy Development:** The establishment of a publicly accessible Statutory Children's Social Care complaints policy. This initiative aims to enhance transparency regarding the decision-making processes of the Complaints Team and the interplay between statutory regulations and other policies.
- The launch of a new Corporate Complaints Policy from 1 April 2025 which is fully aligned with the Ombudsman Joint Complaints Handling Code.
- **Complaints Practice Enhancement:** To maintain our adherence to the Ombudsman Joint Complaints Handling Code, we will reinforce our robust complaints practice through:
 - **Continuous Staff Training:** Implementing an ongoing training programme on the requirements of the Code.
 - **Performance Management Integration:** Collaborating with Human Resources to incorporate complaints handling objectives into staff appraisal documents and job descriptions.
 - **Equality and Accessibility:** Partnering with the equality lead to refine our approach to recording and monitoring reasonable adjustments for individuals lodging complaints.

- **Contractor Oversight:** Enhancing procedures to ensure that contractors and third-party service providers on behalf of the Council manage complaints effectively.
- **Reporting Enhancements:** We will introduce biannual complaints reports to Executive Directors and Lead Members, supplementing the existing annual complaints reporting structure.