

Children's Social Care Annual Complaints Report 2024/2025



Welcome to the refreshed Annual Complaints Report for Children's Social Care. This report has been produced in line with statutory requirements and provides information in respect of complaints related to Children's Social Care Services. This report looks at the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.

The purpose of this report is to provide information in relation to:

- **Complaints received.**
- **A breakdown of the number of complaints received at each stage of the complaints process.**
- **Statistical information regarding the nature of the complaints, and those making complaints.**
- **Outcome.**
- **Timescales.**
- **Complaints considered by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO).**
- **A review of the effectiveness of the complaint's procedure.**
- **Learning and service improvement, including changes to services that have been implemented and details of any that have not been implemented.**

This is the first report Annual Report to be produced by the newly established Policy and Compliance Team. A team established to provide a single point of access for complaints, compliments, Freedom of Information requests, Subject Access Requests, Elected Member and MP casework, across the Council. In establishing the team not only will residents receive an improved customer experience, but it will also enable the Council to better understand residents' concerns and contribute to the Bury Vision and lets do it call for action!

This report will be presented for overview and scrutiny to the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee.

WHAT IS A COMPLAINT

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. A complaint may be made by a written or verbal expression.

Complaints principally concern service delivery issues, including the perceived standard of these services and their delivery by service providers. These recorded figures only represent a percentage of complaints received as many of the issues are resolved on an informal basis operationally and do not need recording by the complaints section.

The Complaints Procedure is not designed to deal with allegations of serious misconduct by staff. These situations are covered under the separate disciplinary procedures of the Council.

For some service users, and for children and young people particularly, it is not easy to make a complaint. This can be the case when the person using the service may be apprehensive about what may happen if they do complain. It is important, therefore, that all complaints are treated seriously, in confidence, investigated and are given due attention. It is therefore the role of the policy and compliance team to provide a degree of independence and support to the complainant whilst ensuring the complaint follows the statutory procedure. If a complaint is received directly from a child or young person, an automatic referral is made for advocate support to Bury Children’s Rights Service, which is an independent advocacy service commissioned by Children’s Social Care.

LEGISLATION

The Children’s Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 is for all representations received by Children and Young People, their parents, foster carers or other qualifying adults about social care provided or commissioned by Children’s Social Care. The act and regulations established procedures that Council with Social Care responsibility have to follow when a complaint is made. This is a three stage process:

Stage 1 – Local Resolution Stage 2 - Independent investigation Stage 3 - Review panel

The section 5 of the Regulations (2009) set a benchmark for all complaints to be investigated within set timescales. If a complaint is going to exceed this timescale the council should write to the complainant to advise them of this and explain the reasons why.

The corporate complaints process is used for anyone else who makes a complaint.

A prime objective of the Children’s Social Care Complaints Procedure is to ensure the Local Authority develops a listening and learning culture where learning is fed back to children and young people who use services. Complaints present an opportunity for the Local Authority to learn why people who are using our services find them unsatisfactory, and how we can improve the services we provide.

The Complaints Process in Bury

We will always try to resolve problems or concerns before they escalate into complaints. When a complaint is initially received, it is logged and acknowledged. It is then allocated to the relevant Team Manager with a request to contact the complainant within 48 hours to attempt to resolve the matter informally. If there is no resolution or the complainant cannot be contacted, the complaint is moved to a formal Stage 1 complaint, local resolution.

Local Resolution requires the Local Authority to resolve a complaint as close to the point of contact with the service user as possible. The Department strives to investigate and resolve complaints within 10 working days although the procedure does allow a 20-working day timescale for more complex complaints. When the investigation of a complaint is completed a letter will be sent explaining the Council's findings, and how the Council will address the concerns raised. Sometimes our findings do not fully support the complainants view of their complaints. However the Council would always give clear reasons for the decisions and explain any misunderstandings.

When the complaint is not resolved at Stage 1, or the complainant remains dissatisfied with aspects of the Local Authority's response, the complaint can be considered at Stage 2. Stage 2 involves an independent investigation which is completed by an external Investigating Officer. This has the oversight of an Independent Person, also from outside the Local Authority, to ensure a full and fair investigation is carried out. We aim to send a Stage 2 response with a full report within 25 working days, although this can be extended up to 65 working days in complex cases.

When Stage 2 of the Children's Social Care Complaints Procedure has been concluded and the complainant remains dissatisfied, they are eligible to request further consideration of the complaint by a Stage 3 Review Panel. The Chair of the Panel decides membership of the Panel on a case-by-case basis. Membership of the Panel would depend upon the issue being complained about as specialist advice may be required, for example an adoption complaint would require an adoption specialist.

The Review Panel does not reinvestigate the complaint or consider any substantively new issues of complaint not first considered at Stage 2. The purpose of the Panel is to consider the initial complaint and wherever possible, work towards a resolution. The Panel should be convened within 30 working days of a request and its report (including any recommendations) will be sent within 5 working days following the meeting. The Department then issues its response to the complainant within a further 15 working days.

If a complainant remains dissatisfied with the Local Authority's response to the Review Panel's recommendations, the complainant has the right to refer their complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman. The Complaints Manager will assist with this process by providing contact details for the LGO. The LGO will not consider complaints which have not completed the Complaints procedure through all three stages.

Advocacy Arrangements in Bury

Children and young people have a legal entitlement to advocacy services to support them in making a complaint or expressing their views.

The Council understands that concerns and complaints received from Children and Young People in Care are very important.

Young people are often supported to make a complaint by Bury Children's Rights.

An advocate from Bury Children's Rights Service will initially raise the concern with the Young Person's Social Worker, and if no timely response is received, this will be referred to the Social Worker's Team Manager for a response.

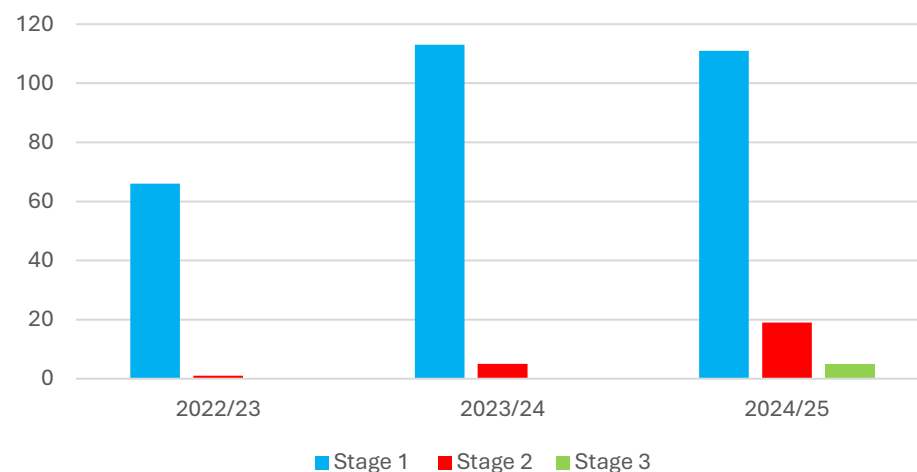
If the Young Person is unhappy with the response, their advocate will assist the child or young person to make a formal complaint at Stage 1 of the Statutory Children's Social Care Complaints Procedure.

The advocacy service aims to ensure that children and young people have access to an independent advocacy service, which ensures:

- They have a say in decisions made about their lives.
- They are able to share their concerns about their circumstances.
- They are listened to and heard.
- They are treated fairly in the course of their contact with Children's Social Care.
- They are supported when pursuing a complaint through every stage of the complaints process.

Complaint activity

Number of Complaints Received by Stage



Total Complaints by Stage

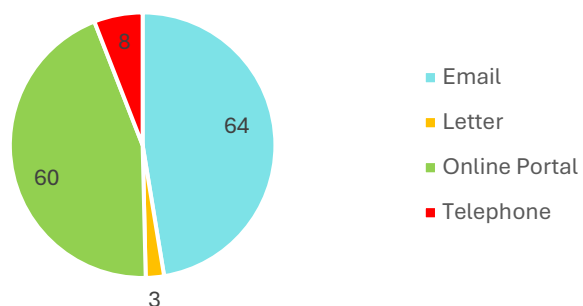
A total of 135 complaints received across all stages, 7 were still open at the end of the year.

Of the 111 at Stage 1, 108 were closed during this year. The remaining 3 cases were withdrawn.

Of the 19 complaints received at Stage 2, 8 of these were closed during that year.

How complaints were received

Method of Complaint



How Complaints are Received:

We offer a range of methods for complainants to contact us.

Overall Complaints from Stage 1 to 3:

Email: 64
Online Form: 60
Telephone: 8
Letter: 3

Customer Types

Complainant	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Parent	73	14	2
Other Family/ Friend	18	2	1
Foster Carer/ Carer	9	2	2
Child / Young Person	1	0	0
Care Leaver	2	0	0
Advocate	2	1	0
Other	5	0	0
Total	111	19	5

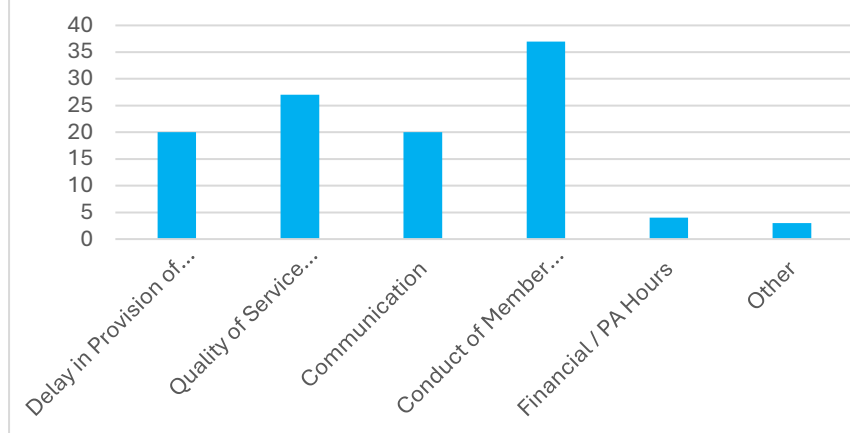
Customer Types

As with previous years, the biggest proportion of complaints received have come in from parents of the children.

With the second highest portion being from other relatives or friends of the family.

One of the stage 1 complaints has been received directly from a child/young person with a further two of the complaints submitted by an advocate.

Themes of Complaints - Stage 1



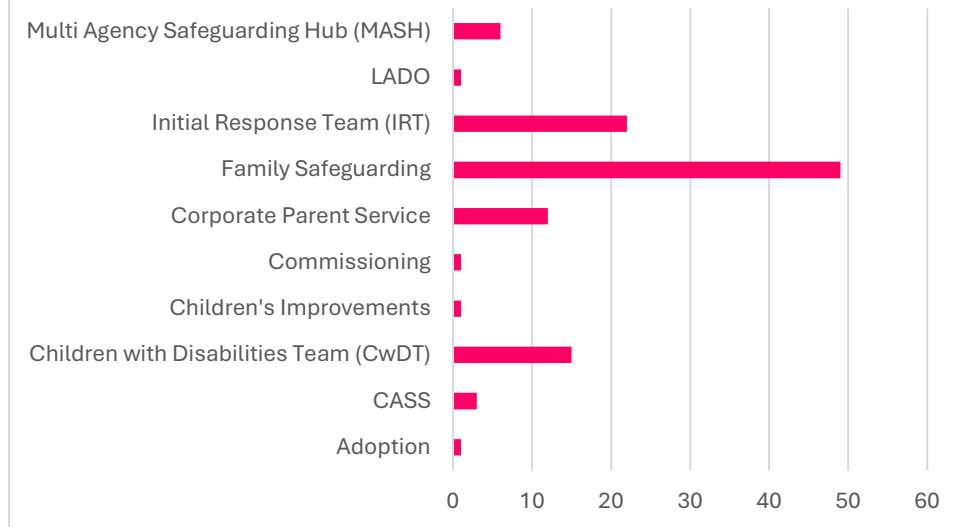
Themes of Stage 1 complaints

A complaint may include a number of areas of concern. Therefore, some complaints cover more than one theme. Where there was more than one theme, these were categorised under the Quality of Service theme only.

The four most common themes Conduct of a member of staff, Quality of Service Provided, Delay in the Provision of Service and Communication.

These account for 81% of all areas that complaints related to.

Complaints broken down by Team - Stage 1

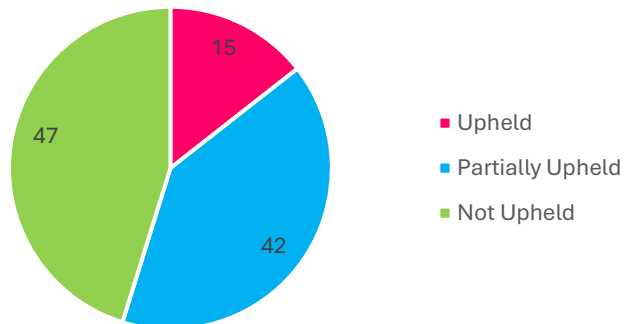


Complaints broken down by Team

Complaints received at stage 1 related to the following areas of Children's Social Care:

Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (6), LADO (1), Initial Response Team (22), Family Safeguarding (49), Corporate Parenting Service (12), Commissioning (1), Children's Improvements (1), Children with Disabilities (15), Children's Advice and Support Service (CASS) (3) and Adoption (1).

Stage 1 Outcomes



Outcomes

From the total 111 stage 1 complaints that were received during the period, 15 complaints had a finding of upheld, 42 were partially upheld and 47 were not upheld. Partially upheld is where part of a complaint has been upheld but other areas have not.

Of the remaining 3 complaints, 1 was withdrawn due to being a duplicate complaint and 2 were withdrawn due to a lack of contact from the complainant.

Timescales and Performance

Timescales

Complaints should be responded to within 10 working days extended to a maximum of 20 working days.

There were 55 complaints received and responded at Stage 1 complaints with an outcome in this reporting

period. 47% were completed within the 20 working day timescale.

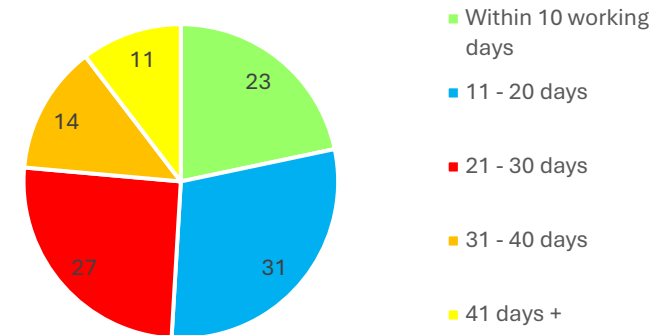
The average timescale was 31 working days.

From the remaining 27 of the 82 complaints received during this period, 3 remain open and 24 were closed as

either refused, closed due to a lack of contact from the complainant, moved on to stage 2 or were withdrawn.

Timescales - Stage 1	Within 10 working days	11 - 20 days	21 - 30 days	31 - 40 days	41 days +
2024/25	23	31	27	14	10

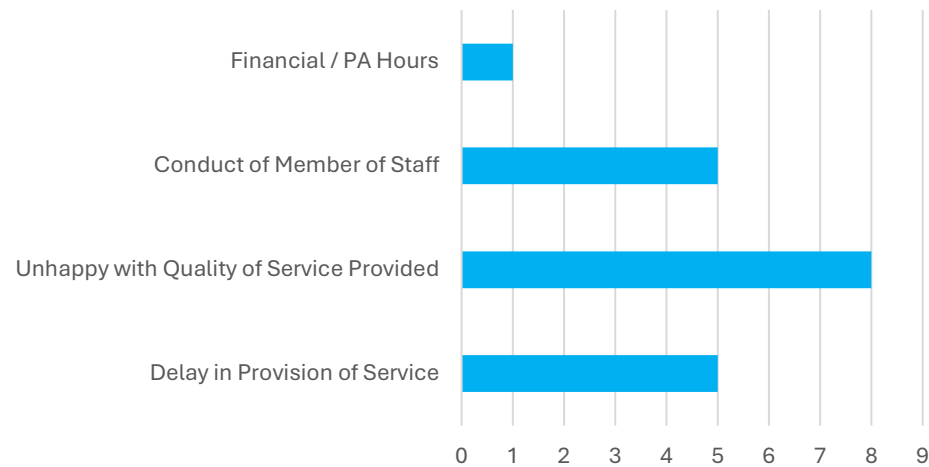
Timescales - Stage 1



Stage 2

Stage 2 Types of Complaints

Themes of Complaints - Stage 2



Complaint Themes

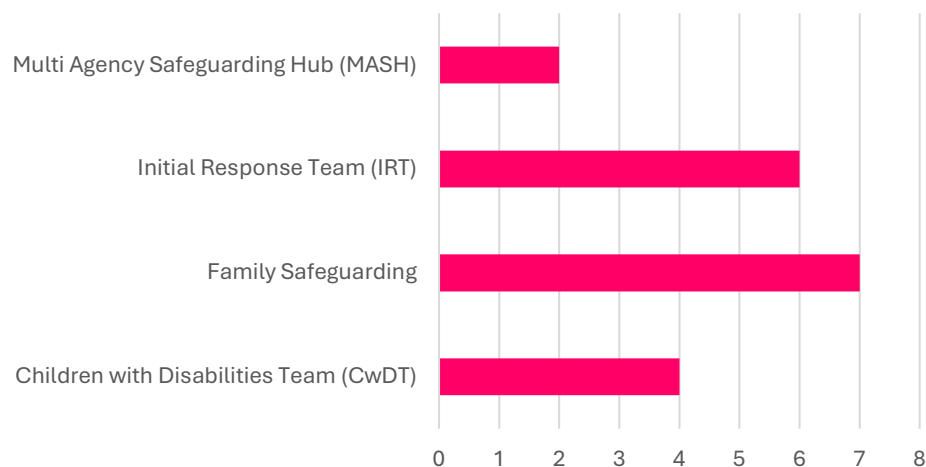
Stage 2 will not normally reinvestigate points that have previously been upheld at Stage 1.

Stage 2 can consider any new points raised or linked to the original complaint.

From the total of 19 Stage 2 complaints received, 4 complaints were withdrawn due to lack of communication from the complainants following request for consent to share their information and files with the Investigating Officer and Independent Person for the investigations.

From the 15 complaint that were investigated, the main three main issues identified were quality of service, delay in provision of service and conduct of a member of staff.

Complaints broken down by Team - Stage 2

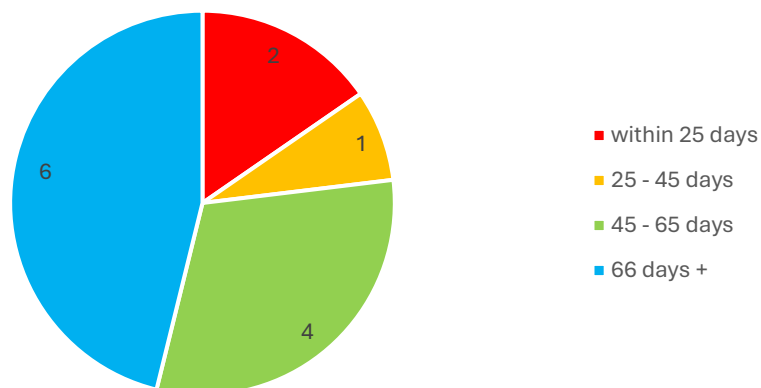


Complaints broken down by Team

Complaints investigated at stage 2 related to the following areas of Children's Social Care:

Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (2), Children with Disabilities (4), Initial Response Team (6), and Family Safeguarding (7).

Stage 2 - Timescales



Timescales and Outcomes

At this reporting stage of the 15 Stage 2 complaints that were investigated; 2 were completed within 25 days, 1 was within 25 – 45 days, 4 were within 45 – 65 days and 6 were over 65 days.

2 complaints were not upheld, 9 were partially upheld and 2 were upheld.

Partially upheld is where there was more than one area of complaint and part of a complaint has been upheld or partially upheld, but other areas have not.

2 of the completed stage 2 complaints resulted in an offer of a financial remedy.

At the stage of reporting, 2 complaints are still ongoing.

Stage 3 Complaints

Stage 3 – Types of Complaint

Where a complainant does not agree with the findings and recommendations of the stage 2 investigation into their complaint, they can ask for the review panel to consider the complaint at Stage 3 of the Statutory Process, within 20 days.

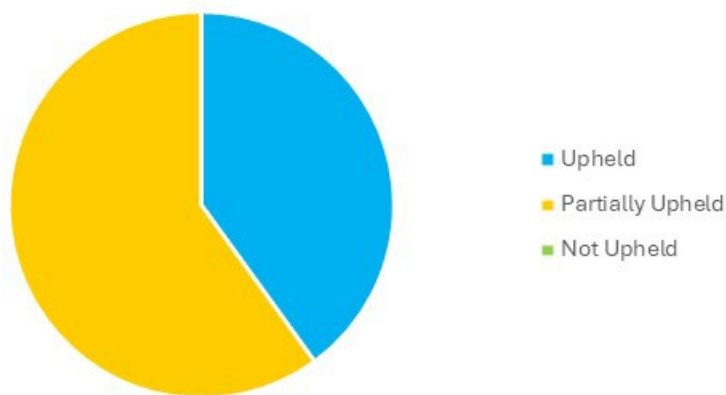
This must include:

- Which parts of the report they do not agree with
- Whether they think there are any factual errors
- Why they think the response by the Head of Service is unsatisfactory.

Main reason for requesting a Stage 3: Dissatisfied with the standard of the stage 2 investigation.

The panel cannot reinvestigate the complaints or consider new complaints. The panel will scrutinise the earlier findings and make recommendations based on the evidence provided.

Outcomes - Stage 3



Outcomes

A total of 5 complaints were escalated to stage 3 and all of these went to panel.

Of the 5 Stage 3 hearings, 2 complaints were upheld and 3 were partially upheld.

As part of the outcomes, the panels made a total of 22 recommendations which ranged from suggesting remedy payments, offering apologies, updating to policies and procedures and training, reminders for staff, and develop information leaflets that would benefit children and their families.

Child in Care (CIC) and Care Leaver Complaints

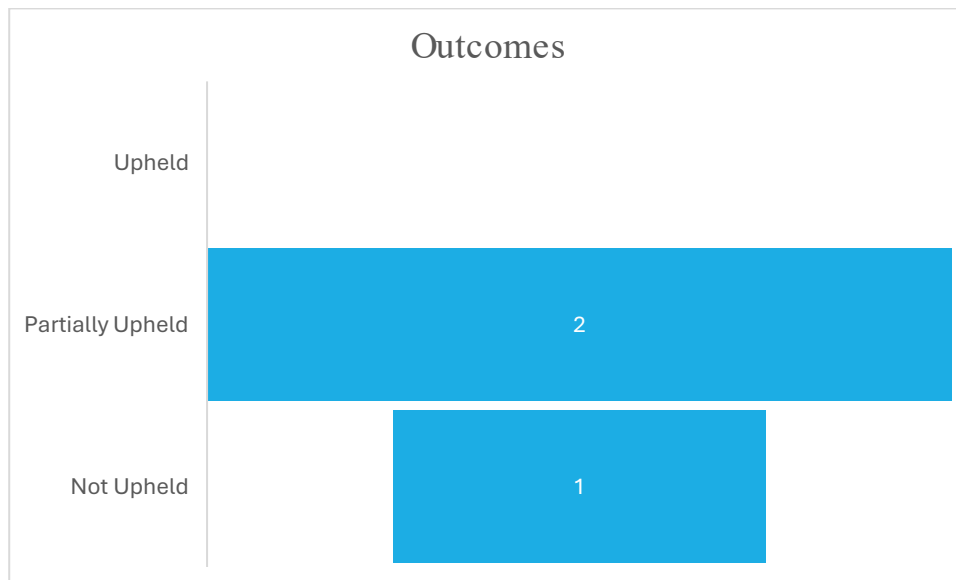
Total Received

Three complaints were made by or on behalf of looked after children in care and/or care leavers.

Of those 3 complaints, all were resolved at stage 1.

The themes of these complaints included lack of support, not being listened to, not being informed of correct legal status, delays being allocated a PA, difficulties accessing personal files and records and records being missing.

Of these three complaints, 2 were partially upheld and 1 was not upheld.



Outcomes

Of these the above three complaints, 2 were partially upheld and 1 was not upheld.

Ombudsman Complaints

The LGSCO can review and / or investigate complaints from members of the public who consider they have experienced injustice because of maladministration by the Authority, typically once the complaint has exhausted the Authority's complaint procedure.

Ombudsman 2024/2025

The LGSCO received a total of 88 complaints in relation to Bury Council. They went on to investigate 18 complaints listed under Education & Children's Services during this reporting period.

Only two of these complaints were upheld, with the Council at fault with an injustice. In both of these cases the appropriate remedy was completed in the set timescales and confirmation received from the LGSCO that they were satisfied and closed the cases.

The decision of "Upheld" is applied when the Ombudsman finds there is some fault in the way the Council acted – even if it has agreed to put things right during the course of the Ombudsman investigation; or had already accepted it needed to remedy the situation before the complaint was apparent to the Ombudsman.

The number of complaints received by the Ombudsman about the Council's Education & Children's Services in 2023/24 were totalled at 35 which was an increase on the 27 cases recorded in 2022/23. This year's figures (*Subject to confirmation from the LGSCO) provide assurance that the service is improving with a lower number of cases than the previous 2 reporting years for this service of the Council.

The highest area of complaint across the Ombudsman's casework remains complaints about poor services for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. This area now dominates their casework, making up 26% of all complaints the service received in in 2023/24.

To help Officers maintain an accurate record and meet the required deadlines, a weekly Childrens Services matrix was produced by the Council's LGO link Officer. This was sent to relevant Officers and Directors to make them aware of live cases with deadlines for actions required and evidence to be produced for the LGSCO.

Regular meetings with the LGSCO have occurred throughout 2024/25 and they have welcomed significant strides the Council has now made to improve its complaint functions. The data and report for 2024-2025 once available will demonstrate the improvements made by the Council and this service area.

Compliments 2024.25

Compliments received by children's social care are an important part of our service feedback. While complaints help us identify areas of improvement, compliments provide valuable insight into what we are doing well. They often highlight effective practice, strong relationships with children and families and positive outcomes that result from the dedication and professionalism of our staff. During the report period 1.4.2024 to 31.3.2025 a total of 46 compliments were formally recorded.

Compliments received have included:

"Big thank you for all your help, you came into lives and actually listened to what I had to say before making any decisions"

"(Social worker) has been brilliant in the short time I have known her, proved to be very reliable, consistent and dependable and very friendly and approachable I'm sure she will be a great asset to your team."

"(Social worker) truly outstanding social worker, consistently goes above and beyond, unwavering dedication in supporting a family"

Key Learning 2024 - 25

Complaints provide invaluable information which may be used to identify issues in services, help staff learning and also identify any risks and so improve services for the future.

Improvement actions/recommendations arising from complaints fall into three main categories:

- Remedial action for individual complaints
- Improving social work practice and delivering training
- Establishing or changing existing processes, policies or procedures

To demonstrate learning from complaints, and the Department's commitment to use complaints to improve standards of services, all Team Managers are required to complete a "Lessons Learnt" form following each complaint investigation. Quarterly analysis of feedback and learning is shared with Managers and is shared during Team Meetings.

The recommendations from complaints received during 2024/2025 are:

The themes highlighted are central to our Improvement Plan. The purpose of the Improvement Plan is to improve the quality of service for children and families. As part of our improvement work, we have implemented a new model of practice which is founded on strengths and relationship-based practice. We have developed the Bury Commitments which describes the cornerstones of good practice and the first of which is relationships.

Changes in social workers is related to the high use of agency, and recruitment and retention is another key workstream within the Improvement Plan. Securing a permanent workforce to ensure that relationship-based practice can flourish is a priority. We are also reviewing our approach to learning from complaints and ensuring that there is a more robust approach to implementing the learning from complaints, including those escalated to the LGO.

The complaints officers will attend SLT regularly to share updates on complaints and learning themes so it can inform service planning and improvement real time.

Reflections and Key Priorities

Complaints and feedback are used to better understand the needs of our customers and offer an opportunity to learn and improve. As a direct result of our complaints in 2024 - 25 the Council we have improved communication with families, made changes to policy and processes and staff and managers have attended specific training sessions.

Since the last annual report, the Council has established a central complaints team, the policy and compliance team under the leadership of the Head of Governance; this team has helped to facilitate regular meetings with senior officers in the department to expediate and support complaint resolution. In addition, the Service has undergone a revisited Ofsted inspection which noted steady progress and stabilisation of the senior management team.

Key priorities for the Policy and Compliance team working with Children's services next year will be continuation of effective communication channels, ensuring quality and timely responses and in particular:

- A culture of accountability, where mistakes are acknowledged and learned from, helps improve services. Addressing issues raised in complaints quickly demonstrates a commitment to improvement.
- Clearly explaining decisions to families and documenting the rationale behind them can build trust and reduce complaints.
- Regular Monitoring and Evaluation: Independent reviews of complaints and continuous feedback loops help identify systemic issues and drive service improvements.
- Effective Complaint Handling: A fair, transparent, and accessible complaint-handling process will encourage families to raise concerns without fear of reprisal and ensures issues are resolved constructively.

These key lessons contribute to building a more responsive, compassionate, and effective children's social care system.

As part of our ongoing commitment to learning and improving our services, the Policy Compliance Team has implemented a change to the complaints submission process. Equality Monitoring questions on the complaint form are now mandatory, with complainants required to either provide responses or select "Prefer not to say" in order to proceed. This adjustment aims to ensure more consistent and comprehensive data collection, enabling us to gain clearer insights into the demographics of those engaging with our complaints process. It is hoped that this will significantly enhance the quality of our reporting and support more decision making in future complaints analysis.

Report Author – Julie Gallagher, Head of Governance

Julie.gallagher@bury.gov.uk