

Customer Feedback Annual Report Children's Services 2016/17

Feedback and Insight Team, Commissioning Support
July 2017



How can I provide feedback on my experience of using a service provided by Shropshire Council’s children’s services?

You can give us your views in a number of ways; use the one that suits you best. If you are a child, you can make the complaint yourself, use an advocate or ask an adult you trust to make the complaint on your behalf. You can:

- Speak to a member of staff.
- Telephone us: 01743 256188
- Email us at: customer.feedback@shropshire.gov.uk

Fill in the customer feedback form on the council website. Use the "make a complaint" button at: <https://new.shropshire.gov.uk/feedback/children-and-young-peoples-complaints/>



Customer Feedback Annual Report

Children's Services 2016/17

1. Introduction

This report covers the customer feedback obtained by Shropshire Council's Children's Services over the period 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017. The report covers comments, compliments and complaints formally recorded on the Council's customer feedback system. Internal reporting takes place on a quarterly basis to allow for ongoing improvement. This annual report offers the opportunity to share information more widely with members of the public.

The Children's Act 1989 and NHS and the Community Care Act 1990 require all local authorities with social services responsibilities in England and Wales to have a complaints procedure. 'Getting the Best from Complaints' provides guidance for local authorities on implementing the Children's Act 1989. The regulations require three main stages within the complaints process: stage 1 - local resolution; stage 2 – investigation; and stage 3 - review panel. The complaints following this process are statutory complaints.

The majority of complaints for children's services are statutory complaints because they relate to the provision of social care. These statutory complaints follow the Council's Statutory Complaints Procedure for children's services, the key stages of which are set out in section 2 of this report.

The remainder of complaints fall under the Council's corporate complaints procedure, for example these may be complaints about a support service or administrative process rather than social care. Complaints for Learning & Skills are very low in number but when these complaints are received they will be corporate complaints. Corporate complaints are investigated at stage 1 and reviewed at stage 2. You can find out more in the Council's Corporate Customer Feedback Report 2016/17.

Complaint

A complaint is a written or verbal expression of dissatisfaction about the service provided by the council. Parents, carers and other trusted adults may complain about the service a child has received. A child may also complain themselves, or receive the support of a professional advocate. We aim to make it as easy as possible to make a complaint.

Compliment

Many people get in touch with a compliment when the information or support they have received has exceeded their expectations. It is really helpful to learn when a service has been provided well or when a member of staff has done a great job. We like to recognise compliments alongside any complaints. It is good for us to say 'thank you' to our teams and staff too.

Comment

Feedback about a service could be:

- a suggestion to improve it.
- a question as to whether something could be done differently.
- an idea for delivering a service differently.



2. The Children’s Complaints Process

Shropshire Council encourages children, parents, carers and others to give feedback and suggests that any concerns are raised with social workers, other members of council staff, teachers or a trustworthy adult. We aim to address any concerns as quickly as possible and provide support if a child or adult wishes to make a more formal complaint.

Complaints, comments and compliments can be made by telephone, email, letter or by using our online form. Support is also available from complaints officers based with Shropshire Council’s Feedback and Insight Team.

For a copy of the leaflets we use see:

<https://new.shropshire.gov.uk/feedback/children-and-young-peoples-complaints/>

Complaints will be acknowledged within 3 working days of being received and we let the complainant know how their complaint will be handled.

STAGE 1 - The Statutory Complaints Officer will contact the appropriate team manager for Children’s Services and ask them to investigate the complaint. The complainant will be provided with a written response within 10 working days (for statutory complaints). In some cases it may take up to 20 working days, but we let the customer know if this extra time is needed and why. If a customer is unhappy with the response at stage 1 they can request to go to Stage 2.

STAGE 2 - If a complaint is not resolved at Stage 1, and the complainant or their representative remains dissatisfied with the investigation or response, an external Independent Investigating Officer and an external Independent Person are commissioned by Children’s Services to further investigate the complaint.

The Investigating Officer and Independent Person will aim to produce a report within 25 working days. However, if the case is complex, they can have a maximum of 65 days in which to produce their reports. Once the reports have been finalised they are sent to the adjudication officer (usually the head of the service) who will, after careful consideration of the reports, provide the complainant with a written response to the complaint.

STAGE 3 - If the complainant still remains dissatisfied with the decision/outcome following the independent investigation, they can ask to have their complaint reviewed by the Complaints Review Panel.

The Complaints Review Panel is made up of three external people who will review the complaint, but they will not reinvestigate or consider new complaints. The complainant can attend the panel meeting if they choose to and can bring a friend or someone they can trust.

Ombudsman - If a complaint cannot be resolved locally it can be investigated by the Ombudsman. The council has a timescale of 28 calendar days to provide a response to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). Complaint responses are often complex and it can be necessary to collate, catalogue and provide a large volume of information for the LGO’s consideration.. Complainants can request to go to the Ombudsman after Stage 2 if they choose to.

We cannot promise to deliver the outcomes complainants want, but we do make sure that complaints are dealt with as quickly and as thoroughly as possible. We work to keep complainants informed of what is happening and the progress being made.

3. Customer Feedback 2016/17

In 2016/17 there were 146 cases of feedback recorded for Children’s services (including Learning & Skills). There were:

- 36 compliments
- 8 comments or other types of enquiry
- 50 corporate complaints
- 52 statutory complaints

112 of the cases were for Children’s Services excluding Learning and Skills (covering social care and support services).

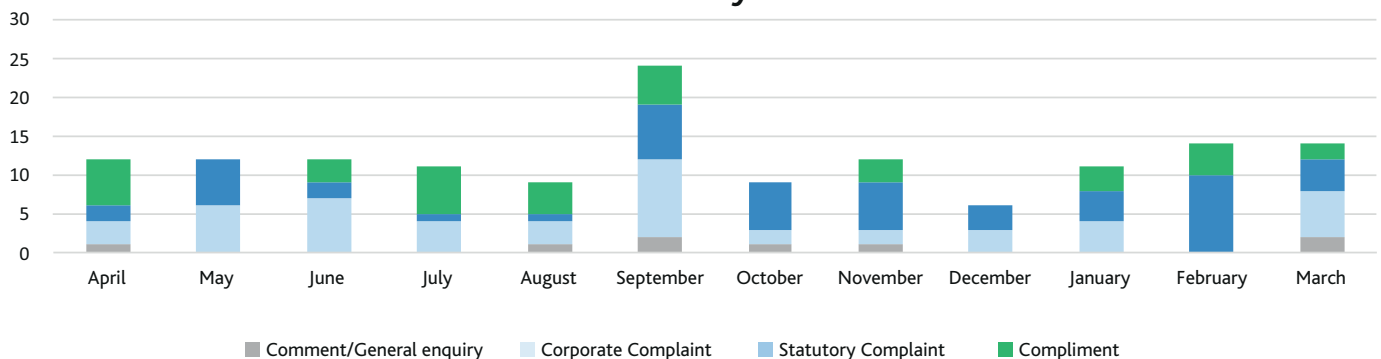
Learning & Skills receive very few cases of customer feedback. In 2015/16 Learning and Skills customer feedback was reported separately but there are so few cases that this year results have been incorporated into one report.

In 2016/17 Learning and Skills had 34 customer feedback cases. There were:

- 12 compliments
- 4 other enquiries (including comments)
- 18 complaints (2 were statutory complaints)

The average number of customer feedback responses recorded per month during 2016/17 was 12.2. September 2016 saw double the number of cases in one month (24), with December receiving half the usual number of cases (6). Volumes of customer feedback cases across the other months were fairly average.

Customer Feedback by Month 2016-17

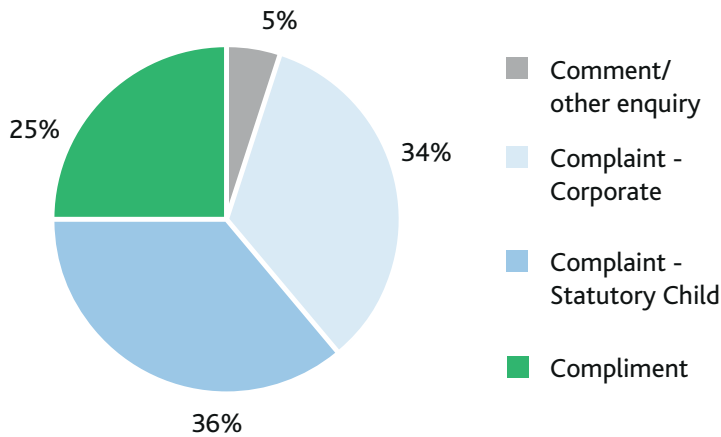


Considering customer feedback by quarter, highlights that Quarter 2 was the busiest period of the year (with the total increased as a result of September’s increase). Quarter 3 saw the fewest cases of customer feedback recorded.

The majority of customer feedback recorded takes the form of complaints rather than comments or compliments (this is due to recording practice, with staff members less likely to more formally report a compliment). Of all the customer feedback recorded, 70% of cases were complaints.

Of the 102 complaints received within the year, 50 were corporate cases (34%) and 52 were statutory complaints (36%). The process on page 6 highlights the statutory complaints process and timescales for children’s services. Corporate complaints tend to be less complex in nature.

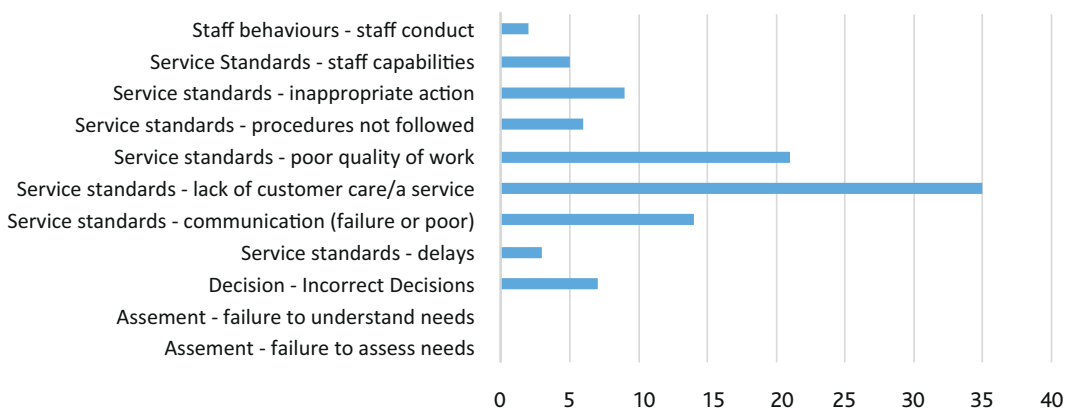
Types of Customer Feedback Received 2016-17



During 2016/17 complaints commonly related to a failure to provide a service or to provide the expected level of customer care within a service (service standards – lack of customer care/a service). Poor quality of work and lack of/poor communication were the other dominant themes within the complaints made. However, despite complaints falling within these overarching categories, there were no real patterns or trends highlighting problems to be addressed (complaints were spread across teams and processes).

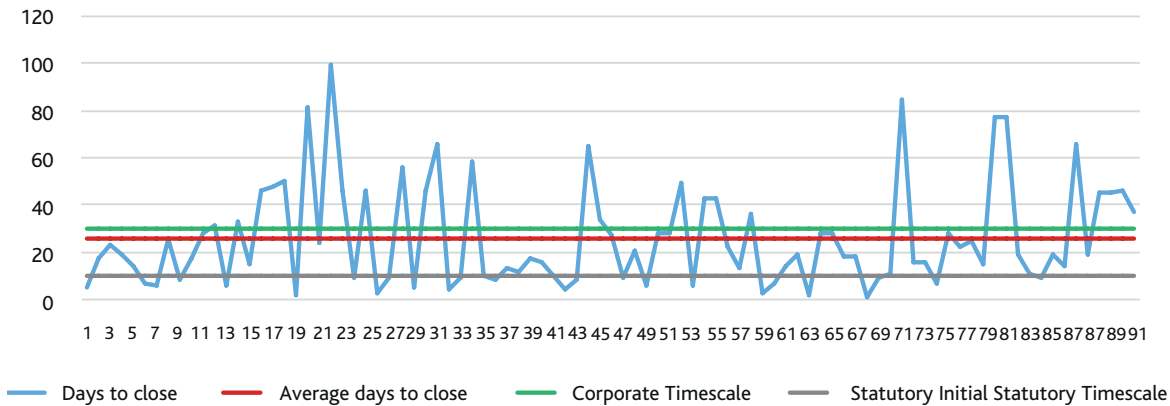
There were no complaints relating to a failure to assess and understand needs and very few complaints related to decisions made (only 7 for the year). This suggests good performance in these areas.

Main reason for complaint 2016/17



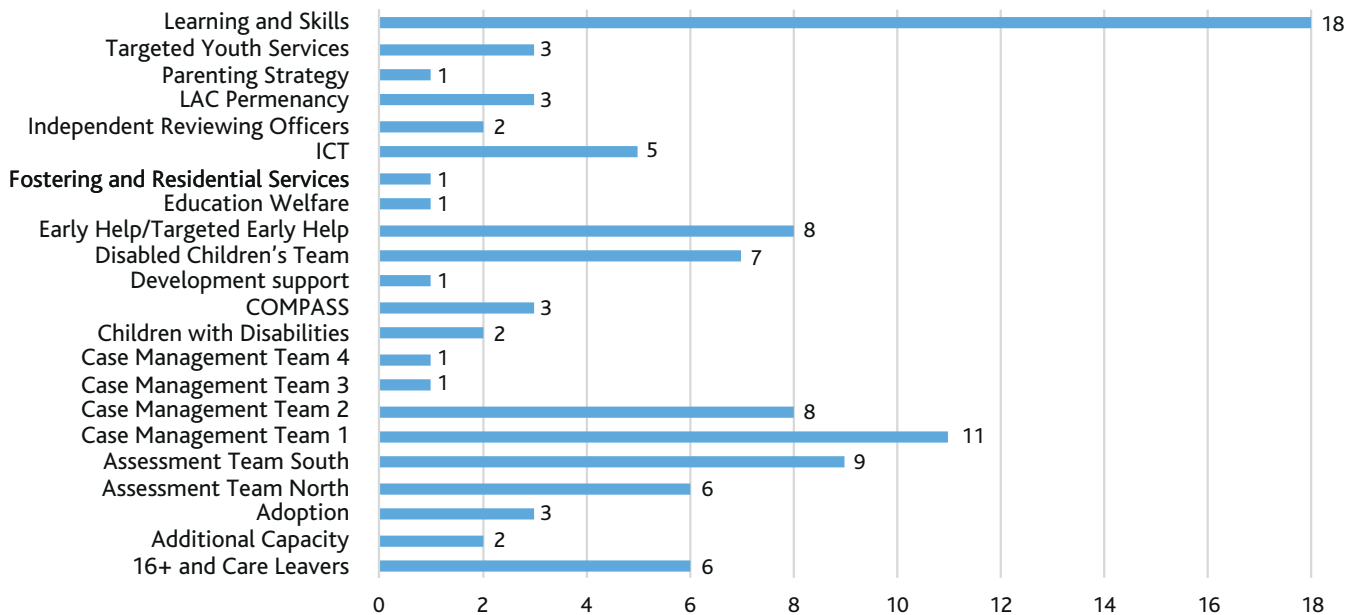
During 2016/17 Children’s Services took an average of 25.8 days to close stage 1 complaints. Corporate complaints took an average of 26.5 days to close (within the 30 day timescale). Statutory complaints took an average of 25 days to close suggesting that the complexity of cases required correspondence with complainants to extend the initial 10 day timescale in order to allow for more detailed investigation.

Days to close - Stage 1 Complaints 2016/17



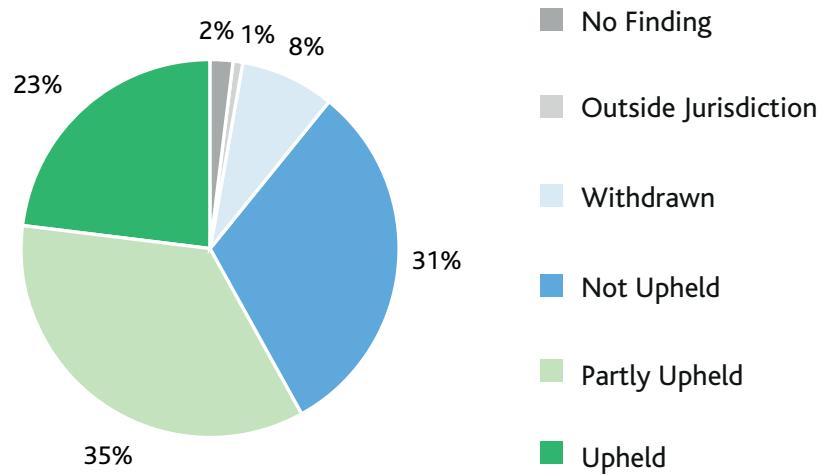
Quarterly reporting considers complaints by team in order to understand whether or not teams require any additional support to identify the reasons for complaints. The analysis highlights that complaints are spread across teams (as are compliments) rather than focused on particular areas of service. Overall in 2016/17 Case Management Teams received more complaints (21 of the 102), the Assessment Teams had 15 complaints, Early Help received 8 complaints and the Disabled Children’s Team had 7 complaints. Learning & Skills received 18 complaints in total (across 8 teams).

Children's Services Complaints by Team 2016/17



During 2016/17, 87 of the 102 complaints received were closed (some recent complaints remained open at the end of the financial year). Of those, 23% were upheld, 34% were partly upheld and 31% were not upheld. Of the complaints that were upheld, 3 were for Learning & Skills and 17 were for Children’s Social Care.

Outcome of Stage 1 Complaints 2016-17



In addition to understanding the outcome of stage 1 complaints it is important to consider how many complaints progress beyond stage 1. During 2016/17 very few complaint cases progressed beyond stage 1. This suggests effective stage 1 handling. In total 6 cases progressed beyond stage 1 within the year (4 were corporate complaints and 2 statutory complaints). One corporate complaint case went on to be considered by the Local Government Ombudsman.

During 2016/17 there were 10 complaints relating to looked after children (2 complaints related to the same complainant/ child). During the year 3 complaints were made by children.

Overall Children’s Services performed well through 2016/17. The next section of the report considers performance in comparison to 2015/16.

4. Annual Comparison 2015/16 and 2016/17

A comparison with 2015/16 data highlights that, overall, performance remains very similar with little change. It is positive to see that good performance has been maintained.

Number of compliments – the same

- There were 36 compliments recorded in 2016/17, the same number as 2015/16.
- Compliments have been made at a relatively steady rate over the year (although there were fewer in the winter months Quarter 3). On average 4 compliments are received per month.



The Same

Number of complaints - remains similar

- The number of complaints received in 2016/17 was very similar to 2015/16. In 2015/16 there were 107 complaints in total (15 for Learning & Skills and 92 for other Children's services) and in 2016/17 there were 102 complaints (of those 18 were for Learning & Skills), showing a slight improvement overall.



The Same

Nature of complaints – different challenges

- When comparing the type of complaints made in the last 3 years it is possible to see a change in complaints. Communication was a dominant theme in 2014/15 (32 complaints) but for the last 2 years complaints about communication have been fewer in number (12 in 2015/16 and 14 in 2016/17).
- In 2014/15 'procedures not followed' and complaints relating to assessment were common themes but in 2015/16 and 2016/17 these topics were not featured significantly (in 2016/17 there were no complaints with assessment as a dominant theme).
- In 2016/17 'lack of customer care/a service' was the most dominant theme within complaints, featuring in 35 complaints (compared to 19 the previous year).
- In 2016/17 the other main category of complaints was 'poor quality of work' (21 complaints) but other types of complaints had significantly reduced in number. There were significantly fewer complaints related to delays and staff conduct.



The Same

Days to Close – remains similar

- In 2015/16 it took an average of 26.5 days to close Children's Services complaints. In 2016/17 the average timescale to close complaints was 25.8 days suggesting performance remains similar (if slightly improved). It should be noted that a small number of long running cases can significantly influence the average timescales.



The Same

Outcome of complaints – More complaints were upheld

- In 2015/16 the percentage of complaints upheld was 16%. The proportion of upheld complaints increased in 2016/17 to 23%. However fewer complaints were partly upheld (34% in 2016/17 compared to 49% in 2015/16) so overall there is little change. 31% of complaints were not upheld (the same proportion as 2015/16). The remaining proportion of complaints were withdrawn, fell outside of Shropshire Council's jurisdiction or did not result in a finding.



Worse

Complaints Progressing Beyond Stage 1 - remains similar

- During 2015/16 there were 8 requests to progress to stage 2. In 2016/17 6 of the cases received progressed to stage 2. This highlights ongoing good performance.



The Same

5. Example Compliments

Shropshire Council's Children's Services received 36 compliments in 2016/17. Examples of the compliments recorded are shown below.

"Thank you so much for all of your help and advice. Also for working with me and supporting me through everything. I don't actually know where I would be right now if it wasn't for you. I know it's your job but I know you helped me with extra things like the housing situation....."

"X [social worker's name] was always very professional, but also extremely kind, sensitive and understanding, which, at what was an incredibly emotional and distressing time for the family, was very much appreciated."

"Thank you for everything you have done for me. Wish there were more people in the world like you."

"X [social worker's name] demonstrated true professionalism throughout her involvement with the whole family".

X [social worker's name] has not only supported us as a family and done his job, but on top of that he has been a strong advocate for us, a listening ear, a sounding board, highly professional and has given us sound guidance and advice.....truly have an amazing social worker on your team".

"I cannot thank you enough for your input, X [name of son] now compared to this time last year is like a different young lad.....His and my relationship is so much better thanks to your help and we are back to being close. He has also obviously valued your input tremendously....."

"X [social worker's name] was knowledgeable, efficient, friendly, conscientious, always ready to listen and always keeping her promises".

"the understanding your child course...was fantastic and a brilliant help to me. ... I feel a much more happy and confident Mum."

"If it wasn't for doing the Every Day First Aid course with Sure Start my baby wouldn't be here now".



6. Example Complaints

Shropshire Council Children’s Services received 102 complaints during 2016/17. Some example complaints have been included to illustrate the way complaints are received and the nature of the issues raised. All complaints have been anonymised and personal details removed. In some cases wording may have been changed very slightly to ensure anonymity (with steps taken not to alter the point being made within the complaint).

“social worker [name removed] lacks professional courtesy, manners, honesty and transparency which has led to an irretrievable breakdown in any workable relationship”.

“Communication was indirect and inconsistent. The timescales and the transitions between each worker have been appalling.”

The complainant has been told the social worker has left the Council. The complainant has been “making numerous call to the team and asking for a call back in order to find out what is happening with the case but has received no call back at all”. He is “getting frustrated and feeling left in limbo not knowing what is happening”.

“There has been a lack of communication and delays by both Children’s Services and Housing Options finding suitable accommodation for X [name].”

“there have been endless problems getting a referral processed due to Compass and CAMHS disagreeing firstly on whether it is myself or the school who should refer and secondly whether the referral should be addressed by CAMHS or ENHANCE. After 7 months of jumping through hoops we have been informed CAMHS have accepted this[and] we are at the back of the waiting line with a 12 month wait. I find this totally unacceptable A year wait is too long and too close to the transition to secondary school.”

“X [name of complainant] has been unable to get hold of the social worker for several months when he has particular issues he wishes to discuss ... or questions which require a reply... Messages left but no response received. Staff at the placement have not had calls returned to them (made on his behalf).”

There have been six different Social Workers working with the children. The change of Social Worker has always been at a crucial time, and the complainant finds this “unacceptable”, commenting that they are “unhappy with the Child Protection Process”.

The complainant reports a “breach of sensitive and private information” and states “this case has been handled with lack of care and professionalism from the beginning with the original Social Worker not carrying out her duties properly, failing to turn up, failing to telephone, failing to write accurate reports etc.”

The LAC review is “far from balanced and [the complainant] feels that it does not portray fully the situation of how the family have tried over many years to support their daughter.”



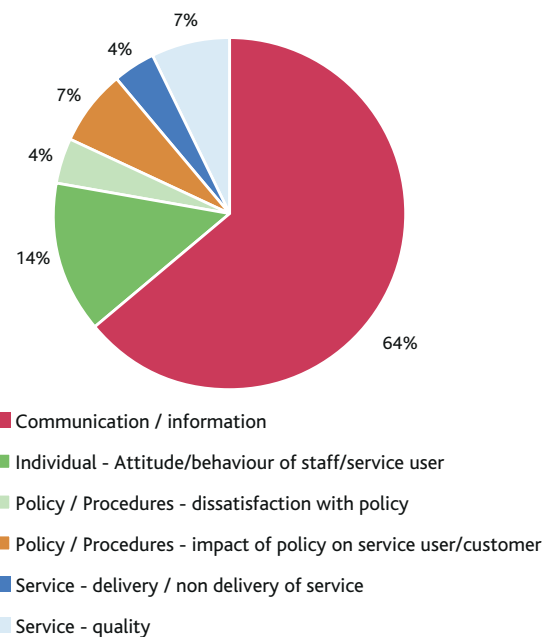
7. Learning and Actions

Shropshire Council’s Children’s Services recorded learning and/or actions against 70 cases (68%) of complaints in 2016/17. This is an improvement compared to 2015/16 where 49% of cases had learning recorded. Limitations in the system used to record complaints means that the ability to easily record and report multiple learning and action points is not currently in place. For that reason only the primary action or learning point can be recorded and reported below. It is hoped this recording issue will be overcome as part of Shropshire Council’s IT transformation programme.

Of the learning points recorded in 2016/17:

- 64% related to the learning concerning communication and/or information provided.
- 14% were learning concerning the attitude or behaviour of staff or a service user.
- 7% of learning points were in relation to the impact on customers/service users of a policy or procedure, and 4% were dissatisfaction with a policy or procedure.
- 7% of learning points were around service quality and 4% were related to the delivery or a service or non-delivery of service.

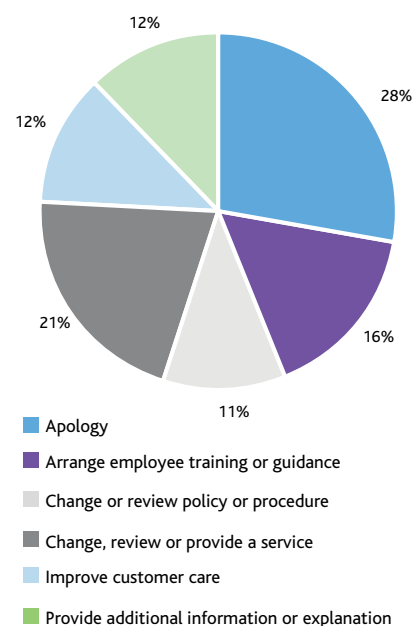
Learning Points Recorded 2016/17



Of the actions that were recorded against the complaints closed in 2016/17:

- 28% of actions were to provide an apology.
- 21% of actions were to change, review or provide a service.
- 16% of actions were to arrange employee training or provide employee guidance.
- Other actions taken included to improve customer care, change or review a policy or procedure, and provide additional information or explanation.

Improvement Actions Recorded 2016/17



In working to report complaints we consider the main problem experienced, but this does not do justice to the complexity of issues that can be raised within a complaint and investigated. Reading complaints in detail highlights that although a complaint may relate to a specific service or concern about lack of a service, there may be other issues such as lack of communication, the way someone felt or perception of someone’s attitude towards them. Complaints reporting does not highlight the details within complaints but the way staff consider and investigate complaints does allow for more learning to take place and allows managers to influence the practice of staff members.

8. Example Learning and Actions

Shropshire Council Children’s Services has worked throughout 2016/17 to take learning from complaints quarterly reporting and work to highlight learning and actions. There are some examples of learning below. These examples may appear out of context because they are not provided with the original complaint but they do highlight how the Council responds to complaints without sharing confidential information. These examples are mainly from upheld and partly upheld cases. Complaints that were not upheld may include some learning within notes on the case and often this can relate to misunderstandings of how the Council has delivered a service or what to expect from a service.

We have apologised to the customer that communication has not been as professional as expected, and hope a positive working relationship can be developed moving forward. We have explained that social workers are not required to notify a parent of an impending visit, as this can generate different circumstances and not allow a fair reflection of usual circumstances.

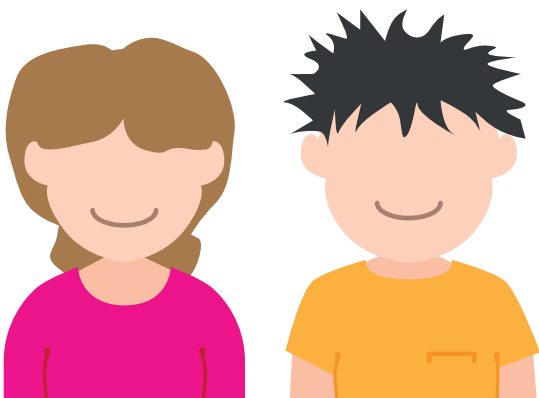
The complainant was thanked for bringing poor social work practice to the attention of Shropshire Council and the social worker involved had their contract of employment terminated. A new social worker has been allocated.

A letter has been written to apologise for the delay in paying an invoice. The delay was human error and the matter will now be handled as a priority. Direct contact details have been provided to provide assistance in future.

A letter was provided to explain that CAMHS is a specialist service for young people suffering with severe and long standing mental health problems and as such they only accept referrals from professionals. Advice was provided concerning how to request support and the next steps to take.

There have been changes made to ensure that staff and parents can communicate about late changes in service in order to avoid a similar incident happening again.

On reviewing correspondence the Council agrees that the letter sent was so brief in its nature that it caused the complainant to feel his concerns were being dismissed. Reassurance has been provided that the Council is taking concerns seriously and wants to support the family and improve the outcomes for the children.



Training and more frequent supervision will be provided for the member of staff. Practice observations will also be carried out and a new line manager has been put in place to monitor and support.

In most cases the process of Direct Payments from assessment through to application is a smooth one with minimal issues however in this case the process was not as joined up, so an apology has been made.

It was acknowledged that there had been a high turnover of social workers and that this had resulted in the complaint. The customer has been reassured about future contact.

A core group meeting was held to assist the family and concerns were resolved.

There was a lack of communication and different teams were not relaying relevant messages to each other. There was also a lack of information provided. Learning has been taken from the case and an apology made.

Learning has been to ensure where possible that contacts are not excessively far away from where the children are residing to minimise the disruption they have already faced.

10. Recommendations

Shropshire Council Children’s Services receives low levels of complaints overall but the annual report helps to highlight action that can be taken to maintain good performance.

Recommendations for 2017/18 are:

- 1 Complaints are currently spread across teams, with more complaints for teams dealing with complex issues or higher volumes of customers (with only 18 for all teams within Learning & Skills a breakdown hasn’t been provided for this service area). This distribution (alongside a closer analysis of feedback) suggests that there isn’t any clustering of complaints for particular areas of service or issues. As a result it is not possible to highlight any significant concerns to address. It is therefore recommended that quarterly reporting continues and should any patterns be identified in future, close working will take place between the Feedback and Insight Team, Commissioning Support and Children’s Services to put in place remedial actions.
2. Although communication was not always a primary reason for making a complaint, on reading the detail of complaints communication is an underlying theme throughout. It is recommended that staff are regularly reminded to respond promptly to customers and to ensure correct contact details are provided (leaving telephone messages and not having a call back was a common issue raised).
3. On the theme of communication again, some complaints cases highlight that ongoing email correspondence (and/or letters) do not always help to resolve concerns quickly. Where staff members recognise that progress is not being made, it is recommended that meetings are organised. Face to face communication often allows a better understanding on both sides and a more immediate resolution.
4. One issue within the complaints recorded over the year appears to be dissatisfaction with the actions taken by social workers. Although this is not a dominant concern featured within the reporting it does stand out as an underlying issue within complaint descriptions. It is possible that these problems occur when there is a higher turnover in staff and when temporary and agency staff have been in place. It is recommended that Children’s Services Managers consider whether or not this an issue and implement mechanisms to monitor this if necessary.
5. Overall performance in relation to timescales is good on average. However, since children’s services complaints are part of a Council wide system, it is recognised that higher than average volumes of complaints in other service areas can impact on children’s recording and response times due to staff capacity. This is regularly monitored, and due to concerns that this may already have had some impact on response times and recording, steps are in place to try and bring in additional staff support to keep performance on track.



Recommendations continued...

6. It is recommended that all staff within Children’s Services are regularly reminded of the importance of recording. Good complaints investigations rely on a review of information recorded. If information isn’t available it can make investigations challenging. The Local Government Ombudsman have been clear in communicating the message that “if it isn’t recorded it hasn’t happened”.
7. Some of the complaints received by Learning & Skills do not fall under the responsibility of Shropshire Council (although sometimes work is undertaken to provide initial assistance before advising the complainant to contact the appropriate school or other educational provider). It is recommended that communication work is undertaken to better highlight the appropriate route for education and schools complaints (advice is available on the Council’s website but additional notices or signposting from other webpages would be beneficial to increase awareness).
8. All services can find that there are times of pressure, particularly as a result of staff absences or new requirements. It is recommended that team managers maintain regular communication with senior managers if complaint handling at stage 1 becomes difficult. It is as a result of effective stage 1 complaints handling that stage 2 cases are kept to a minimum. Early action to add additional capacity to a team or share workload across teams has been effective in the past and allowed good complaints handling performance to be maintained.
9. Mistakes are made occasionally and maintaining a supportive culture where staff are encouraged to identify problems and work to share learning is an important element of maintaining good performance in relation to customer feedback. It is also positive to see that Children’s Services apologise to customers and understand that an apology is not to be viewed as an admission that something was wrong but a recognition that a customer has not received the service they had expected or hoped for.
10. It is recommended that team managers are reminded about the importance of reporting compliments and not just complaints. Compliments help to provide a more rounded picture of customer feedback. A team receiving larger numbers of complaints can appear to be a concern until a consideration of compliments highlights that there is a more balanced view of the service overall.
11. Over 2016/17 work has been taking place to develop additional resources to support staff in identifying and investigating complaints and responding to customer feedback (this will include model documents, templates, leaflets and posters). As this information is made available on the Council’s Staff Intranet it is hoped that Children’s Services will assist in promoting the new resources to all staff members.
12. It is recommended that close working is maintained between Children’s Services and Shropshire Council’s Feedback and Insight Team as IT transformation is delivered. It will be important to work together to address current system challenges and ensure future systems for recording and reporting customer feedback are as effective as possible and that changes do not impact on complaints performance.



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For more information concerning Shropshire Council's
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