



Children and Families
Directorate

**Complaints,
Compliments and
Comments Annual
Report
2020-2021**

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1. Introduction

This Annual Complaints and Compliments Report for the Children and Families Directorate covers the period April 2020 to March 2021. The purpose of this report is to:

- Provide information on the number and nature of complaints received; responsiveness and outcomes;
- Provide information on the number of compliments received;
- Identify the learning and actions resulting from the issues raised; and
- Identify challenges, future plans and actions.

2. Complaint Description and Procedure

A complaint may be generally defined as 'an expression of dissatisfaction or disquiet' in relation to a child or young person, which requires a response. A complaint may be by written or verbal expression.

It is a legal requirement that Children's Social Care Services has a distinct complaints procedure. This statutory procedure provides the means for a child or a young person to make a complaint about the actions, decisions or apparent failings of a Local Authorities Children's social care provision. It also allows an appropriate person to act on the behalf of the child or young person concerned or to make a complaint in their own right.

A prime objective of the Children's Social Care Complaints Procedure is to ensure the Children & Families Directorate develops a listening and learning culture. Complaints present an opportunity for the service to learn why our services users find them unsatisfactory, and how we can improve the services we provide.

3. Stages of a Complaint

The Children and Families 'Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure' sets out the stages for dealing with complaints, as follows:

- Informal Resolution Stage - This stage is an opportunity for the Council to put things right and resolve the complaint within a short period of time without going through the formal complaint process. This aim of this stage is for early resolution.
- Stage one - problem solving and local resolution
- Stage two - formal independent investigation
- Stage three - complaints review panel (consisting of a panel of three independent people, one of whom acts as Chair)
- Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman - If the complaint is not resolved after Stage 3, the complainant can refer their complaint to the Ombudsman. A complainant can approach the Ombudsman at any stage; however, the Ombudsman is unlikely to consider the complaint if it has not been through all stages of the complaint procedure. In certain circumstances, early referral after Stage 2 can be considered.

4. Overview of Representations made to the Local Authority

Key Headlines 2020/21

More complaints (at 48) were received in 2020/21 as compared to 41 in the previous year, although the number was considerably lower than the 2018/19 figure.

More compliments were received in 2020/21 (at 257) than in any of the previous 5 years.

In 2020/21, 19 of the 48 complaints were resolved through Informal Resolution before proceeding to a stage 1 investigation; the remaining 29 received a stage 1 investigation of which 10 complaints proceeded to stage 2.

1 request was received for a stage 3 panel.

81% of Stage 1 complaints were responded to within the statutory timescales.

67% of Stage 2 complaints were responded to within the statutory timescales (5 complaint investigations from 2020/21 are ongoing).

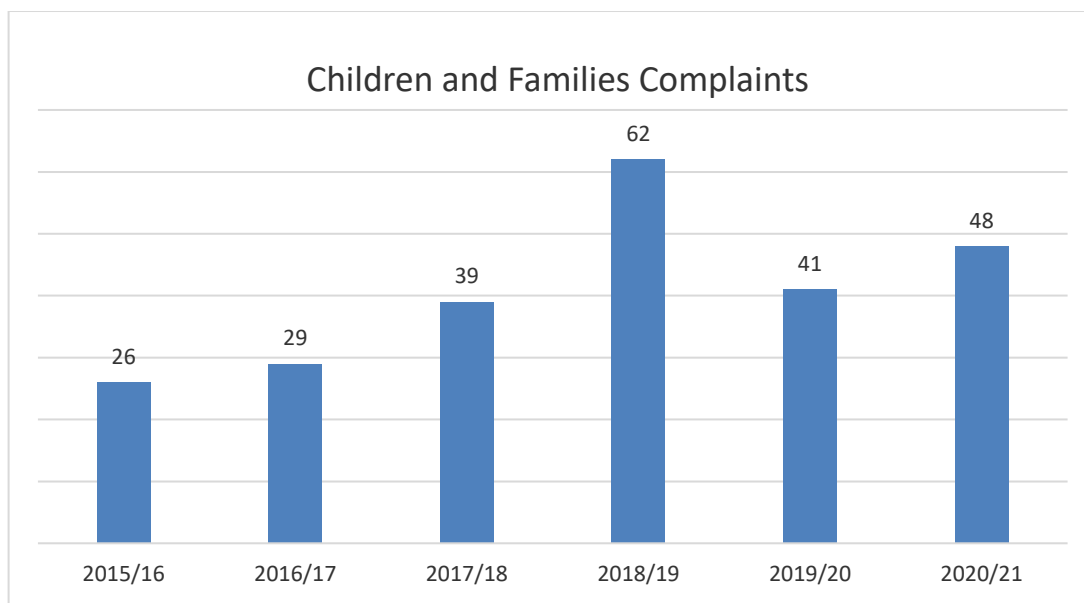
4 complaints were considered by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

5. Analysis of Complaints

5.1 Number of complaints

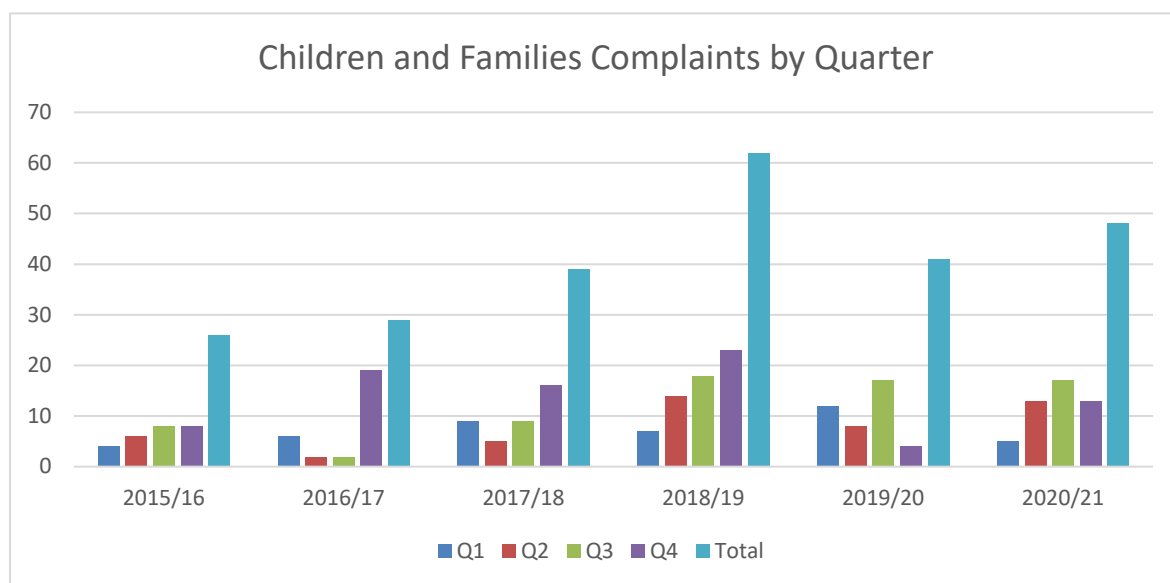
Graph 1 below compares the number of complaints received since 2015/16.

Graph 1



As graph 1 above shows, a total of 48 complaints were received in 2020/21, compared to 41 complaints received in 2019/20; an increase of 7 complaints.

Graph 2



The quarterly review in graph 2 demonstrates an increase in complaints being received each

year. It is noticeable that there was an unprecedented decrease in complaints received during Q4 2019/20 and Q1 of 2020/21, which may have been as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown, although this is just an assumption.

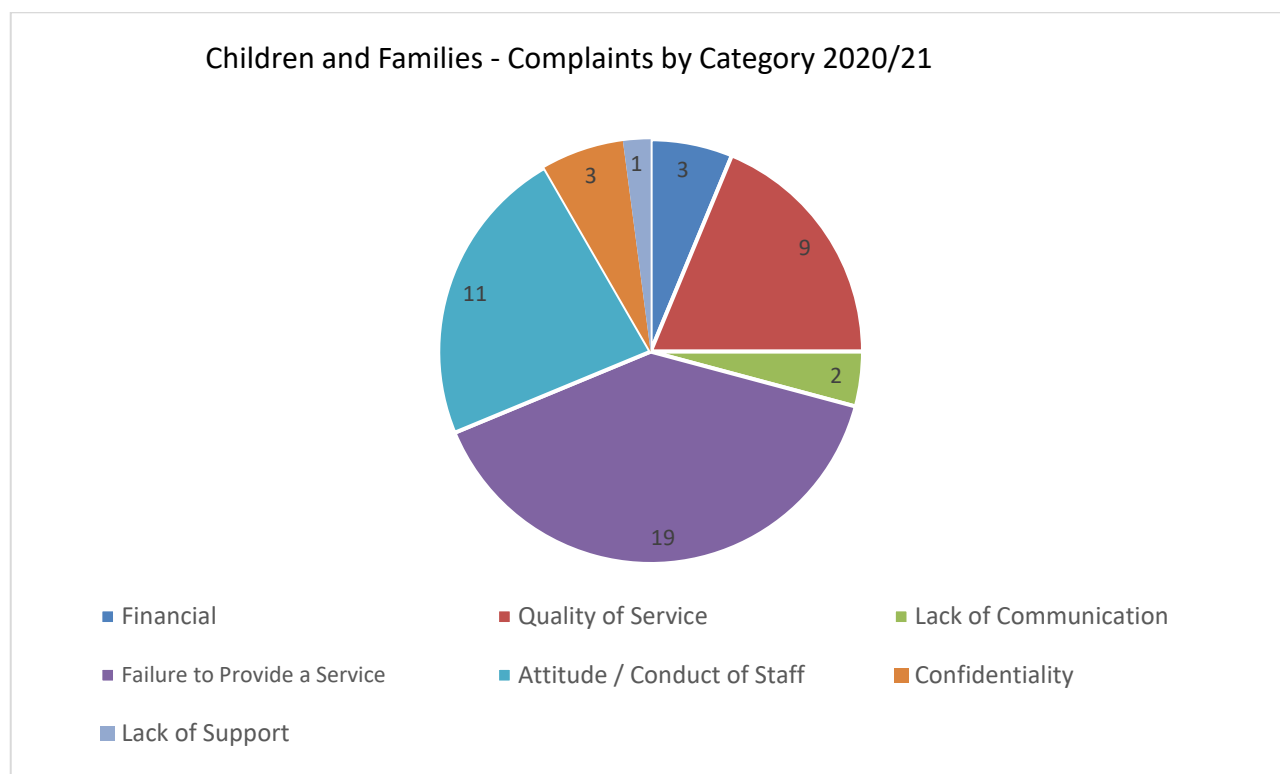
5.2 Complaints by Service Area

The table below shows a breakdown of complaints by Service Area.

Service area	Informal	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Ombudsman
Early Help & Partnerships (incl. Health Visiting and School Nursing)	1	1	1	0	0
Safeguarding & Children In Our Care	15	22	6	0	3
Education & Skills	3	5	3	1	1
Other	0	1	0	0	0
Total	19	29	10	1	4

5.3 Nature of complaints

Graph 3



The highest volume of complaints received were for Safeguarding and Children In Our Care. Failure to Provide Service and Attitude/Conduct of Staff were the highest categories.

Where complaints concern the attitude and conduct of staff, these can be particularly difficult to resolve. At times complainants disagree with the action of the Local Authority and these

complaints require careful professional judgement to determine if staff conduct has been inappropriate, or if the action has been necessary to protect the welfare of children.

The complaints procedure is not designed to deal with allegations of serious misconduct by staff. These situations are covered under a separate corporate disciplinary procedure.

5.4 Complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO)

A complainant can refer their complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) at any time during the complaint process if they feel dissatisfied with our response, however the LGO is unlikely to consider the complaint if it has not gone through the Council's own complaint procedure first. In some cases, complaints can be referred to the LGO at the conclusion of Stage 2, if certain criteria are met.

During 2020/21 we were made aware of 4 complaints that were referred to the LGO. The outcome of the 4 investigations is as follows:

1 complaint was not investigated by the LGO due to the historical nature/ the complaint relating to decisions of the court rather than the Council. In most cases, the LGO cannot investigate if the complaint has not been made within 12 months of the complainant becoming aware of the matter unless they decide there is good reason to do so. The LGO also cannot investigate a complaint about the start of court action or what happened in court.

1 complaint was not investigated by the LGO due to the complaint relating to court action and the LGO being unable to consider complaints about what happened in court.

1 complaint was not investigated by the LGO as it had not been through the Council's own complaint procedure. Before undertaking an investigation, the LGO must normally be satisfied that the Council knows about the complaint and has had an opportunity to investigate and reply. Usually, the LGO expect people to have exhausted complaints procedures before considering whether to investigate, as the Council is best placed to resolve things that have gone wrong. This complaint was referred back to the Council.

1 complaint was investigated by the LGO and the Council were deemed to be at fault. The LGO agreed that the remedy the Council have taken to right the injustice was satisfactory. The LGO also asked the Council to complete an audit within 3 months and report back to the LGO with their findings. The audit was completed by the Council and no further communication has been received since.

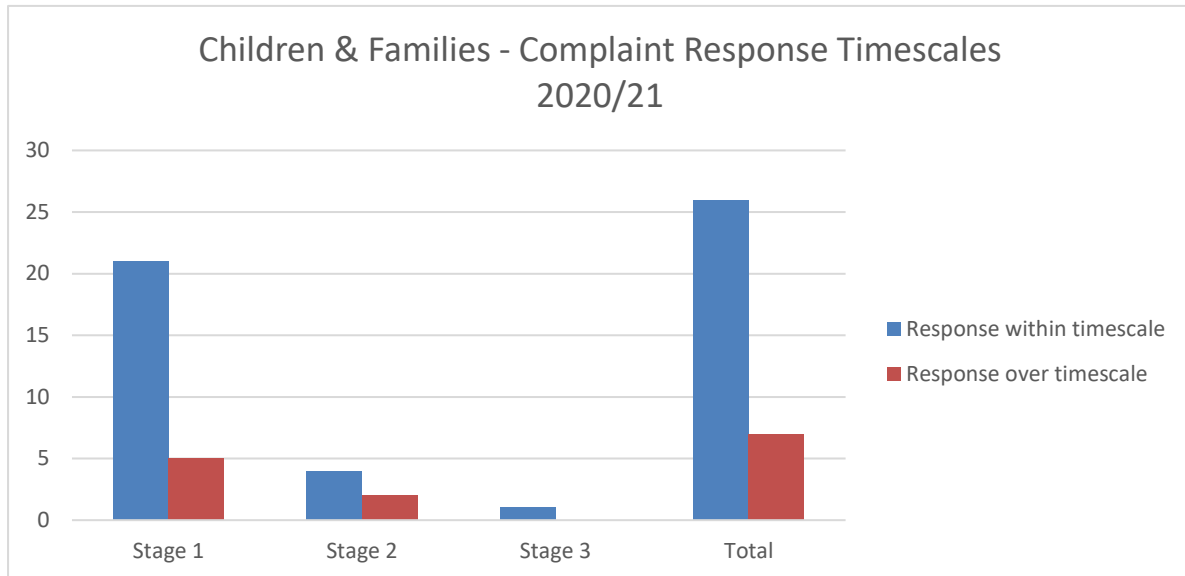
A complaint made in 2019/20 was upheld by the LGO when it concluded in September 2020. The LGO found the Council to be at fault, however the Council had already offered an appropriate remedy to the injustice caused.

5.5 Complaint Timescales

We have a statutory duty to respond to complaints within a specified time frame. For Stage 1 complaints this is within 10 working days (up to a maximum of 20 working days) and for Stage 2 complaints this is within 25 working days (up to a maximum of 65 working days). Stage 3 panels should take place within 30 working days of the request with a response from the Director within 15 working days of the panel.

Graph 4 below shows the response timescale at each stage for 2020/21:

Graph 4



There has been an increase in formal complaints being resolved or withdrawn before reaching Stage 1 due to our staff being able to manage complaint responses informally and enabling early resolution.

As graph 4 above shows, 81% of Stage 1 complaints were responded to within statutory timescales, 67% of stage 2 complaints were responded to within statutory timescales (5 complaint investigations are still ongoing), and 100% of stage 3 complaints were responded to within timescale.

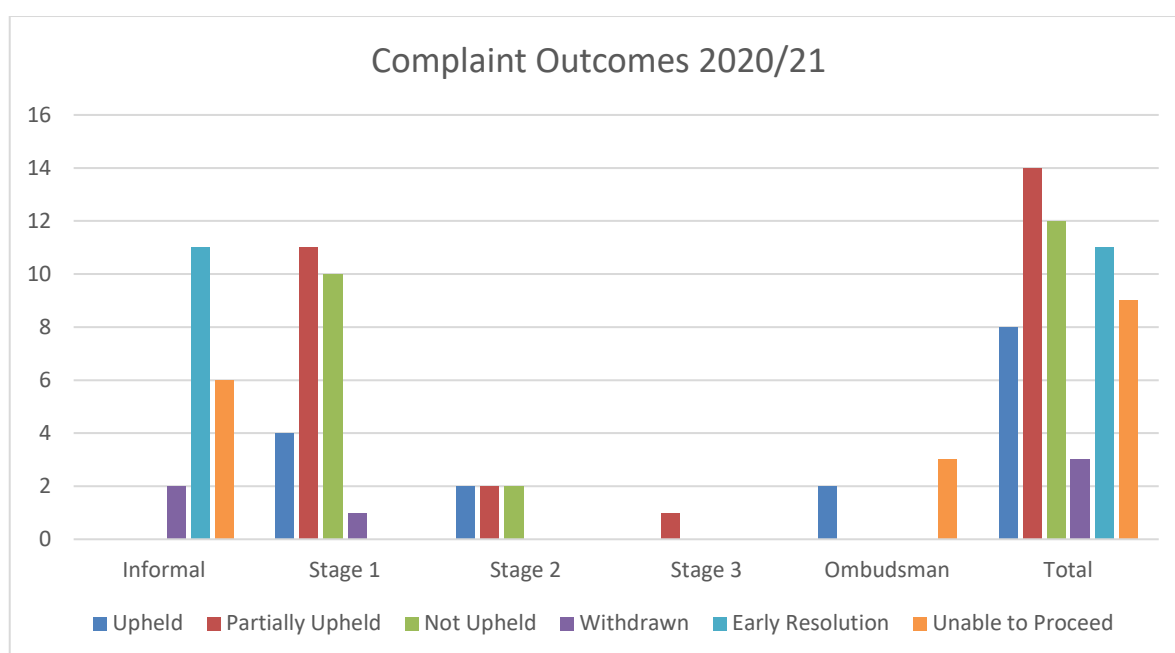
The statutory guidance allows Councils to extend timescales for responding to complaints due to the complaint being particularly complex, or other factors which prevent a full investigation to be undertaken, such as key members of staff being on leave. The Council always endeavours to provide a response to complainants as soon as possible to address their concerns and provide an appropriate remedy.

5.6 Complaint Outcomes

A total of 57 complaints across all stages of the complaint procedure were closed between 1 April 2020 and the 31 March 2021. From 2020/21 this includes 19 complaints resolved before reaching the formal stages of the complaint procedure, 26 Stage 1 complaints, 5 Stage 2 complaints, 1 Stage 3 complaint and 4 complaints that were referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. Also included in these figures are two complaints which relate to the previous financial year 2019/20 and closed in 2020/21, 1 of which is a Stage 2 complaint and 1 which was investigated by the LGO.

The following graph demonstrates the outcomes.

Graph 5



As graph 5 demonstrates, 7 complaints were fully upheld and a further 13 were partially upheld. Regardless of whether the findings are upheld there is often learning that can be taken from any complaint. We understand the importance of listening to and acknowledging any feedback about our services in order to put matters right at the earliest opportunity, and to learn and improve.

5.7 Organisational Learning

We are constantly improving our approach to learning from complaints. All complaint outcomes are considered at senior management level to identify any wider learning to be shared with wider staff teams, which will help us to improve our services.

One area for improvement has been identified as staff needing further support and training to undertake Stage 1 and Stage 2 investigations to ensure that our responses to the complainant are specific and transparent, and our complaint findings clear. As a result, we have reviewed and updated the response templates for all complaints and guidance to all staff on how to identify and respond to complaints. We are implementing a new training programme in Summer 2021 which will require attendance from all Stage 1 and Stage 2 Investigating Officers. The

training will focus on complaint investigations and should result in better quality investigations and a consistent approach across the directorate.

In order to demonstrate learning from complaints and the Directorates commitment to use the learning from complaints to improve standards and services, all recommendations arising from complaints are now discussed in the Children and Families Quality Assurance meetings.

Learning from complaints has identified some training needs and has led to a number of service improvements and changes to processes, some of which are listed below:

- Guidance for staff to ensure they are aware of good practice in confidentiality and ensuring they are speaking to the right person before disclosing their identity at home visits.
- Improvements in management oversight and practice for the Children with Disabilities Team.
- A review of the Banding Policy for Children in Our Care.
- Individual learning and development around communication skills when speaking to service users and parents, and keeping parents involved as appropriate following a referral.
- Review of the procedure in place between Redcar Council and the Emergency Duty Team to provide better access in emergency situations.
- Guidance for staff to ensure they are aware of good practice in returning calls and emails to parents in a timely manner.
- Review of guidance relating to Life Story Work and Words & Pictures for staff and how to explain the purpose more clearly with other professionals.
- Review of timescales for providing paperwork for strategy meetings to all relevant parties to ensure information is distributed in a timely manner.
- Individual learning and development around confidentiality and GDPR regulations

Weekly, quarterly and annual complaints/compliments reports have been reviewed and revised. This has ensured that the complaints received can be acted upon in a timely manner. Reports are discussed and reviewed in weekly management meetings and monthly performance meetings.

Next Steps:

- To continue to emphasise to staff the importance of making service users aware of the complaints and compliments process, as this provides valuable feedback to ensure the Directorate focuses on the quality of service we deliver.
- To provide support and training for staff completing Stage 1 and Stage 2 investigations and responses.
- To continue to review the way in which we engage with service users and use their comments and concerns to feed into how we design and review the services we deliver.
- To promote advocacy services for the young people we care for and support.

6. Supporting Young People

Every child or young person is offered an advocate when they make, or say they wish to make, a complaint. We commission the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) to support and assist children and young people to make complaints and support them through the complaints process.

Aside from the advocacy process, a complaint can be progressed through our Independent Reviewing Officers for children in our care and we make available complaint forms via our website and Personal Advisors as ways of young people making complaints or giving feedback to the service should they wish to do so.

In 2020/21 we received 1 complaint via NYAS on behalf of a child. We did not receive any other complaints directly from a child. With this in mind, we have created a specialist children's leaflet to tell children and young people how to they can make a complaint or give a compliment and how they can get support from an advocate.

NYAS have launched new guidance on how to complete a referral for advocacy and this has been circulated to staff teams.

7. Equal Opportunities Monitoring

Whilst efforts have been made to monitor the ethnic origin, gender, disability and age of the Council's complainants, this is not always possible. This can be attributed to complainants using a variety of methods to submit their complaint, including over the telephone, in person, writing a letter or via email. Some complainants have completed a designated complaints form but have elected to not complete the diversity questionnaire.

Due to the limited data returned, a true and accurate reflection of the diversity of the complainants cannot be reported.

8. Repeat and Vexatious Complaints

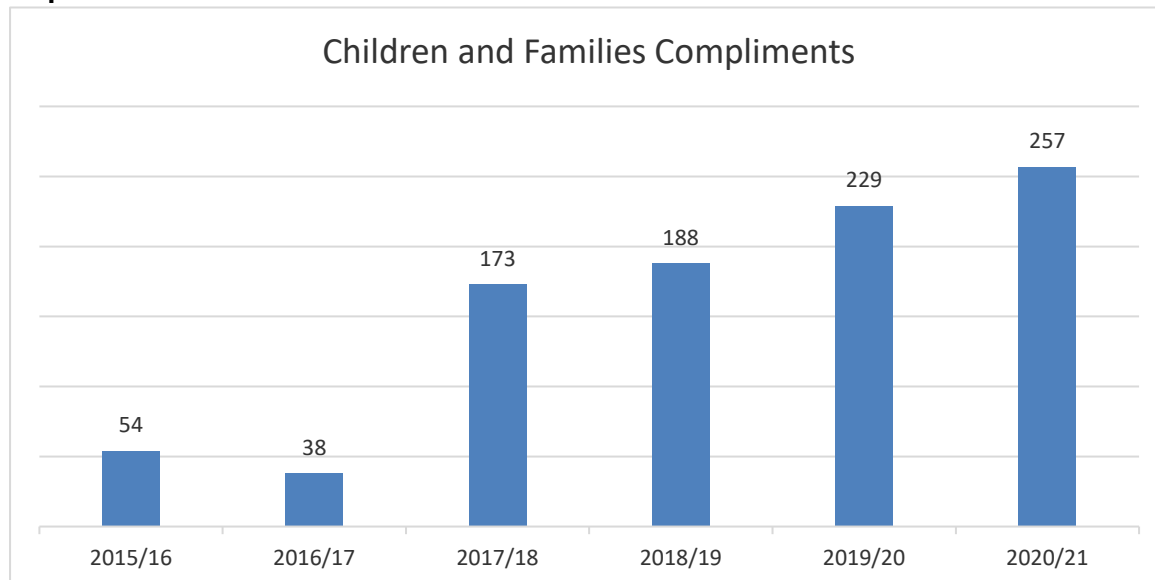
Vexatious or repeated complaints impacts greatly on the time of both the investigating officer and departmental staff and hinders the completion of complaints. In 2020/21, 1 complainant was identified as being a vexatious complainant and their contact to the offices was restricted.

The Local Government Ombudsman remains a source of advice in these situations.

9. Compliments

The graph below shows a comparison of the number of compliments received since 2015/16.

Graph 6



We received 257 compliments in 2020/21 which is an increase on previous years.

The areas receiving the highest volume were Early Help and Youth Services (74), Social Work Teams (68), followed by Health Visiting and School Nursing (61). The highest performing areas have the highest ratios of frontline staff, therefore it can be anticipated that they would receive the highest number of compliments.

Examples of compliments received include:

Social Work Teams - XX has been very valuable to our family in ensuring she listened and acted upon everything presented to her. I found XX to be very professional, listening to all my concerns and doing everything she could to alleviate them. She acted on my behalf and my daughter's behalf to ensure she was getting all the help she should have been.

Health Visiting and School Nursing – I have had the most incredible support from XX especially through these uncertain times, she does her job brilliantly & I feel lucky to have a health visitor that I feel comfortable talking to & get the support back. She is there to contact and always replies so efficiently. She continues to do an outstanding job and is a real credit to health visitors. She is calm, caring & very informative.

Early Help - During the time of XX working with our family, I have found myself managing better having someone to listen and understand our difficulties that wasn't directly involved. Helped me understand that after going through difficult times there were brighter times ahead. XX was always kind and compassionate and sometimes the voice of reason when I couldn't understand how we ended up where we were. Me and my young children are in a much better place now and I am grateful to XX for all her time and help.

The promotion and communication of compliments takes place within team meetings and the directorate's newsletter to encourage staff to record and celebrate the compliments received

10. Conclusions

The number of complaints received increased in 2020/21. Strict monitoring and follow up of complaint investigations continues to be a priority to ensure complaints are responded to effectively and within the statutory timescales.

The number of compliments received has increased year on year. This is a positive reflection on service improvement in recent years.

Learning from complaints can provide a valuable insight into areas for practice development which in turn can result in further compliments. There has been good progress made during the last year to maximise the opportunity for us to learn and develop our services as an outcome of complaints.

Children, young people and their families should continue to be routinely informed about the complaints procedure and encouraged to exercise their right to complain should they be dissatisfied with the service received. Equally they should be encouraged to submit any comments and compliments regarding service delivery where appropriate.