



Complaints & Compliments Annual Report 2021-22

SUMMARY

An overview of complaints, compliments, SARs activity and performance for the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

AUTHORS

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TO:	ADULT SOCIAL CARE, CHILDREN'S SERVICES & EDUCATION COMMITTEE		
DATE:	19 October 2022	AGENDA ITEM:	
TITLE:	BFFC ANNUAL COMPLAINTS & COMPLIMENTS REPORT 2021-22		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR HOSKIN	PORTFOLIO:	CHILDREN'S SERVICES
SERVICE:	BRIGHTER FUTURES FOR CHILDREN (CHILDREN'S SERVICES)	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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Purpose of report

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of complaints, compliments, SARs activity and performance for the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

Executive summary

This report outlines the work that Brighter Futures for Children (BFFC) and Reading Borough Council (RBC) have carried out to improve customer relations. The report's main focus is on complaints and compliments, also covered are Subject Access Requests (SARs).

Children's Social Care, Early Help, Education and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services in Reading are delivered by Brighter Futures for Children (BFFC), a not-for-profit company wholly owned by, but independent of, Reading Borough Council. Through a Service Level Agreement, Reading Borough Council's Customer Relations Team handles the administration of complaints, compliments and SARs.

This report details information for the year 2021/22, analysis of the data, quality assurance and information on service developments as a result of learning from complaints.

Under the current monitoring system, information about complaints received directly by teams is reported to the Customer Relations Team upon receipt. This is to ensure that the Customer Relations & Information Governance Service Manager is aware of all current complaints in order to monitor their progress and highlight cases that can be resolved through alternate dispute resolution (ADR) to team managers and senior staff.

This SLA is led by the Customer Relations & Information Governance Service Manager for the Council and overseen by BFFC's Head of Communications & Marketing.

Complaints, particularly in the emotive arena of children's services, are inevitable. The way that they are handled, however, can help reduce the number of escalating complaints and can improve parental and family understanding of the need for intervention by children's services and the positive outcomes for children and young people.

BFFC recognises complaints are an important source of information to help the company understand where and why changes need to be made to improve the service provided.

During this the financial year 2021/22 the service received 65 statutory complaints, which is a decrease of 5 (7.14%) against the 70 received in 2020/21.

Of the 65 complaints received:

- 9 were resolved through alternative dispute resolution (ADR) by the social care teams.
- The remaining 56 progressed to a formal investigation, although six of these were subsequently withdrawn by the complainant once the investigation had commenced.

During this reporting period, 11 complaints progressed to a Stage 2 investigation. Some of these related to Stage 1 complaints received in this reporting year, and some to Stage 1 complaints received in the previous reporting year (2020/21). Of these 11, five then progressed to a Stage 3 investigation. We also received a further four requests for a Stage 3 investigation, although these were progressions of Stage 2 complaints received in the previous reporting year (2020/21).

Both the Customer Relations Team, on BFFC's behalf, and BFFC's Communications & Marketing and HR/Training Teams have continued to raise awareness of the complaints process with both staff and the public.

The 'Children's Social Care Complaints 2021/22 – Summary Report' attached at **Appendix A** provides an analysis of the data for statutory complaints; it explains how complaints are managed and how the learning is used to improve services. This will be made public through both Reading Borough Council's and Brighter Futures for Children's websites.

The Council and BFFC have worked closely to drive improvements in the services offered to children and young people and to signpost to information on advocacy, early resolution and the complaints procedures.

The 2021/22 report shows a marked improvement in the number of complaints received.

Nevertheless, BFFC recognises there is much room for improvement and is actively working to better the services offered to its customers.

Recommendations

Both BFFC's Board and the Adult Social Care, Children & Education Committee is asked to:

- Note the contents of the report and intended actions to further improve service delivery and the management of representations, particularly complaints, in children's services in Reading.
- Note the continuing work to raise awareness of all conflict resolution processes, including the statutory complaints process and encourage appropriate use by children, young people and their families.

Context

The NHS & Community Care Act 1990, Children Act 1989, Children Act 2004, Department of Health and Department for Education Guidance & Regulations require that the children's social care service sets up and maintains a complaints procedure. They also require that local authorities operate the procedure within specified timescales and that methods of investigation, a summary of statistical information on complaints and a review of the complaints process are included in an annual report.

Activity

Brighter Futures for Children operates a 3-stage procedure in respect of statutory complaints about children's social care made by 'qualifying individuals', as specified in the legislation. Qualifying individuals are defined in national guidance as a child or young person, their parent, carer or foster carer or 'anyone who could be seen to be acting in the best interests of the child'.

The timescale for responding to complaints at Stage 1 is 10 working days, which can be extended to 20 working days in certain circumstances. The RBC Customer Relations & Information Governance Service Manager, who is the designated complaints manager for BFFC, also has to be aware of all complaints as they are being dealt with.

The corporate complaints procedure gives an opportunity for those who are not 'qualifying individuals' under the social services legislation, to still be able to complain about children's services and this route is used for all corporate and education (incl. SEND) complaints.

Contribution to strategic aims

Customer relations contribute to both BFFC and RBC's aims to enhance emotional wellbeing and deliver outstanding services for children in need and those needing protection in Reading. It does this by providing an impartial and supportive service to children and families who wish to complain or raise a concern and ensuring that there is learning from complaints.

RBC's Customer Relations Team and the Customer Relations & Information Governance Service Manager administer this service on behalf of Brighter Futures for Children, under a Service Level Agreement. The BFFC Board has oversight of service delivery and on actions relating to lessons learned, as part of the company's strategic aim to improve children's services in Reading.

Community engagement and information

Information about the complaints process is provided verbally to service users via BFFC's Children's Social Care teams and Independent Reviewing Officers, as well as by the Customer Relations Team. Full information is also on the website www.brighterfuturesforchildren.org. Leaflets on the procedures are widely distributed and available in a variety of formats and languages on request to the Customer Relations Team or through the use of ReachDeck on BFFC's website.

In all children looked after reviews and all child protection conferences, the chair always mentions the complaints process so that our most vulnerable children are reminded of their right to complain and a leaflet is provided. Service users are also able to register a complaint via the web, text, email directly to the Customer Relations Team, in person, by phone, in writing or via an advocate.

The Brighter Futures for Children website has a direct link to the complaints service and the Customer Relations Team has published the details of the Customer Relations & Information Governance Service Manager and the BFFC advocacy provider, Reconstruct. The Customer Relations Team also works closely with Healthwatch Reading and other organisations that offer free help line support to children in care and carers who may wish to complain and require assistance.

Translation services are provided for complainants whose first language is not English and advocacy support is available for young people who wish to make a complaint.

Equality impact assessment

The Customer Relations & Information Governance Service Manager will ensure that the statutory complaints process is accessible to all customers regardless of their race, gender, disabilities, sexual orientation, age or religious belief.

The statutory complaints process is designed to ensure that any concern or issue faced by vulnerable children and their carers is addressed in a timely and impartial manner.

Legal implications

The statutory foundation of the children's social care services complaints procedures are the Local Authority Social Services Act (1970), The Children Act (1989), The Children Act (2004), The Human Rights Act (1998), The Adoption and Children Act (2002) and The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (2006).

It is a requirement of the Department of Health's standards and criteria for complaints management for children's social care that an annual report including complaints is presented to a public meeting.

Financial implications

There are no capital or revenue implications arising from this report. However, BFfC has an obligation to ensure the service provided by RBC's Customer Relations Team is value for money, that the SLA is regularly monitored and that all complaints are handled in a trauma informed, restorative and timely manner to minimise the likelihood of legal costs associated with escalation of complaints that could have been better resolved earlier.

Value for money

The overriding aim of both BFfC and RBC is to work towards informal resolution wherever possible. BFfC works to the principle of a restorative and trauma informed approach and is keen for complaints to be resolved to the complainant's satisfaction, at the earliest possible stage. The Customer Relations Team works to this aim and ensures that most statutory complaints are resolved within the Stage 1 process so that expensive Stage 2 investigations and Stage 3 panels are minimised.

Risk assessment

There are no specific financial risks arising from this report.

Background papers

['Getting the Best from Complaints'](#) Government Publication, August 2006

Appendix A

Children's Social Care complaints for Brighter Futures for Children 2021/22

Summary report

Introduction

This is a summary report of the data for statutory complaints received by Brighter Futures for Children (BFFC) for the financial year 2021/22. The report shows there were 65 complaints, a decrease of 5 (7.14%) on the 70 received in 2020-21. This reduction is steady and continuous, reducing from the 96 received in 2018/19, when BFFC began the delivery of children's services in Reading.

This report will be made available to the public through the Reading Borough Council (RBC) and BFFC websites.

In addition to the quality of service provided, there are many factors that can affect the number of complaints received such as satisfaction, customer expectations, awareness of the complaints process, and the extent of promotional activity.

A high number of complaints should not be interpreted simply as meaning that Brighter Futures for Children is providing a poor service, while at the same time a low number of complaints should not be interpreted as meaning people are satisfied with the service.

When interpreting the statutory complaints statistics, it is important to take into account not just the number received but the number and proportion that are upheld.

Brighter Futures for Children welcomes feedback through the complaints process. As well as providing opportunity to identify where services have not been provided as they should be, feedback can also provide customer insight and help identify any deficiency in practice, policies and procedures. It is from these that the service and those who work within it can continue to learn and improve practice and service delivery.

Statutory complaints procedure

Complaints dealt with through the statutory procedure involve three stages.

At Stage 1 complaints are investigated and responded to by a manager in the relevant service area.

If the complainant feels that the issues they have raised remain unresolved, they have the right to progress their complaint to Stage 2. Consideration of complaints at Stage 2 is normally achieved through an investigation conducted by an investigating officer and an independent person. The independent person is involved in all aspects of consideration of the complaint including any discussions in the authority about the action to be taken in relation to the child. At the conclusion of their investigation, the independent person and the investigating officer prepare independent reports for adjudication by a senior manager (usually the Director of Children's Social Care).

When Stage 2 of the complaints procedure has been concluded and the complainant is still dissatisfied, they can request a review of the stage 2 investigation, by a review panel at Stage 3. The Panel must consist of three independent people.

The statutory children's social care complaints process encourages the complainant and BFFC to consider Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR) at every stage of the complaints process. This means

resolving a complaint or concern informally through a face to face meeting or telephone discussion. Entering into ADR does not restrict the complainant's right to request a formal investigation at any stage. It is the complainant's right to request the presence of a customer relations manager at any face-to-face meeting.

Summary of compliments and complaints activity, quality assurance & learning

There has been a 7.14% decrease in the number of complaints received compared to the previous year. This means there were 5 fewer complaints (65) compared to 70 last year. Of these, 50 went to formal investigation, with 44% responded to within timescale and 56% outside the agreed timescales. A further six were withdrawn by complainants.

The top three themes for 2021/22 were as follows:

- Quality of Service provided or received – 23 (35.4%).
- Staff conduct – 14 (21.5%); and
- Procedure – 13 (20%)

Examples of complaints recorded as **Quality of service provided or received** include: the parent or carer disagreeing with the content of an assessment or care plan proposed for a child or young person, concerns from parents or carers about contact arrangements with their child looked after and the child or young person being unhappy about the move to a different placement.

Staff conduct complaints are recorded as such when complaints are received about specific individual members of social work staff.

Procedure complaints are mainly about the actions, or lack of, taken by a team or individual relating to a specific case.

Quality assurance

The Customer Relations Team carries out checks of all complaint responses to ensure the quality of the response and that the language and terminology used is easy for the complainant to understand, particularly if the complaint is from a child or young person.

All responses made during the year (100%) were checked by the Customer Relations Team before being sent out. The findings and recommendations arising from complaints are shared regularly with BFFC's Board, Senior Leadership Team and operational managers. The Customer Relations & Information Governance Manager and the Customer Relations Team are also available to the complainant and the investigator for advice on best practice during the complaint investigation but remain impartial.

The Customer Relations & Information Governance Manager delivers training on investigating and responding to statutory Stage 1 complaints and also on the corporate complaints procedure to BFFC staff. The Customer Relations & Information Governance Manager also attends team meetings to provide training and advice to front line staff.

Training is available online and can be accessed by all social care staff through BFFC's training department and via BFFC's training portal. Take up of this on-line training has been very low. However, two face-to-face training sessions for operational managers were delivered in 21/22. A training session was also commissioned via the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman, specifically for the Service Managers who investigate complaints at Stage 2.

The complaints procedure is promoted to external groups and publicity material is available to staff, children and young people on both RBC and BfFC's websites. Parents or carers with learning difficulties or other needs can access the information using the ReachDeck accessibility tool on the BfFC website, or they can be signposted to local, impartial organisations, such as Reading's Information Advice and Support Service (IASS).

Processes have been improved to ensure responses due are discussed and monitored regularly. BfFC's senior managers get regular updates on all complaints which are live and under investigation. BfFC staff are in more regular contact with the Customer Relations Manager and the Team and are aware of the process, which has led to improved joint working for the benefit of complainants.

Monthly reports of the Service Level Agreement are provided to the BfFC Contract Manager. Quarterly reports are prepared for the BfFC Board and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and for the Council's Corporate Management Team (CMT).

Support network

The Customer Relations & Information Governance Manager participates in the Southern Region Complaints Managers' Group and is the current vice chair of the group and also attends the National Complaints Managers' Group. Both groups continue to support customer relations and complaints managers in sharing good practice, both nationally and locally. Where cases are complex the Customer Relations & Information Governance Manager often seeks advice and guidance from the Council's Legal Services Team, and the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's advice line.

Complaints activity statistics

In the year 2021/22, children's social care received 65 statutory complaints, which is a decrease of 5 (7.14%) compared to the 70 received in 2020/21.

To give this some context, in 2021/22, 2,479 children in total were referred to children's social care, so the number of statutory complaints represents 2.6%. These referrals were regarding a mix of both new and existing children and young people.

During this reporting period, 11 complaints progressed to a Stage 2 investigation. Some of these related to Stage 1 complaints received in this reporting year, and some to Stage 1 complaints received in the previous reporting year (2020/21). Of these 11, five then progressed to a Stage 3 investigation. We also received a further four requests for a Stage 3 investigation, although these were progressions of Stage 2 complaints received in the previous reporting year (2020/21).

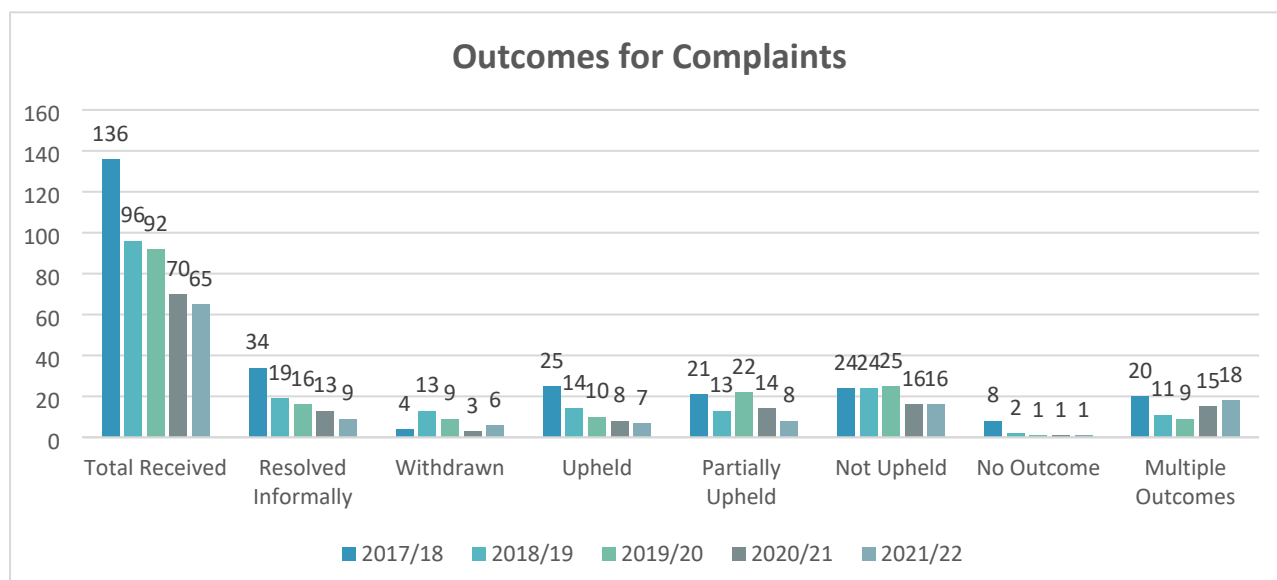
Of the 65 complaints received:

- 9 (13.8%) were resolved as representations informally through alternative dispute resolution (ADR) (Stage 0) by the social care teams.
- 6 (10.7%) of the remaining 56 complaints were withdrawn by the complainant following a resolution with the service after the investigation had commenced, leaving 50 (89.3%) which were investigated at Stage 1 to an outcome.

Of the 50, 22 (44%) were responded to within timescale, with the remaining 28 (56%) complaints responded to over timescale.

Of the 50 complaints investigated to an outcome, 7 (14%) were recorded as fully upheld, 8 (16%) as partially upheld, 16 (32%) as not upheld, and 1 (2%) as having no recordable outcome. The remaining 18 (36%) were complaints with multiple strands to the complaint, where several

outcomes were recorded. A complaint is recorded as partially upheld when the issues the complainant is raising are accepted, but where it is either out of BFFC's hands or remit to resolve the matter to the complainant's satisfaction.



Total number of Stage 1 complaints (including those resolved by alternative dispute resolution (ADR) and eventually withdrawn) received in the last five years.

Year	Number of complaints received	% Increase against previous year	Number of cases referred to Children's Services	% of complaints against referrals
*2017/18	136	3.03%	2,717	5.01%
**2018/19	96	-29.4%	2,765	3.47%
2019/20	92	-4.17%	2,564	3.6%
2020/21	70	-23.9%	2,384	2.9%
2021/22	65	-7.14%	2,479	2.6%

* Pre-Brighter Futures for Children

**Mostly pre-Brighter Futures for Children, which became operational on 3 December 2018.

Outcomes for those investigated to a completion (excluding those resolved via ADR and those eventually withdrawn)

Outcome	Number	% of Total
Upheld	7	14%
Partially upheld	8	16%
Not upheld	16	32%
No outcome	1	2%
Multiple outcomes	18	36%
Total	50	100%

Timescales

Total Investigated to an Outcome	In Timescale	% of Total	Over Timescale	% of Total
50	22	44%	28	56%

Total Resolved Informally	In timescale	% of Total	Over Timescale	% of Total
9	6	66.7%	3	33.3%

Main theme of all complaints received during 2021/22

(NOTE: This includes all complaints received and resolved informally, withdrawn, and investigated to an outcome at Stage 1, but does not include complaints investigated at Stages 2 & 3, as these themes are duplicates of Stage 1)

Theme of complaint	Number	% of Total
Communication	7	10.8%
Lack of Support	8	12.3%
Procedure	13	20.0%
Quality of service provided	23	35.4%
Staff conduct	14	21.5%
Total	65	100%

Who the complaint was received from

Who made the complaint	Number	% of Total
Advocate	5	7.7%
Child *	1	1.5%
Friend	1	1.5%
Landlord	1	1.5%
Parent (Incl. Adopted or Foster Parents)	42	64.6%
Professional (Care Worker, Social Worker, etc)	3	4.6%
Self **	12	18.6%
Total	65	100%

* These are complaints received directly from a child, usually under the age of 12, sometimes via an advocate.

** These are complaints received from young people who are clients in their own right, usually care leavers around the age of 17 or 18.

The majority of complaints are from the birth parents who disagree with social care involvement and outcomes from assessments, care plans and wish to challenge a professional decision. Of the 42 complaints received from parents, 19 of them were from fathers who felt excluded from the processes. Complaints of this nature are inevitable, however high-quality record keeping, clear communication with a clear distinction between fact and opinion reduces the opportunity for dispute.

Complaints received by team

Team	No. of Complaints	%
Access & Assessment Team	19	29.2%
Children in Need Team	2	3.1%
Children Looked After Team	6	9.2%
Children & Young Persons' Disability Team	5	7.7%
Early Help Team	1	1.5%
Family Intervention Team	21	32.3%
Leaving Care Team	10	15.5%
Special Educational Needs & Disabilities Team	1	1.5%
Total	65	100%

The three areas which received the highest number of complaints were the Family Intervention Team with 21 (32.3%), the Access & Assessment Team with 19 (29.2%) and the Leaving Care Team with 10 (15.5%). This can mainly be attributed to the challenging circumstances in which these particular services work in and the volume of their direct contact with service users.

Methods used to make a complaint

Method	Number	% of Total
E-mail	45	69.2%
Letter	3	4.6%
Telephone	10	15.4%
Webform	7	10.8%
Total	65	100%

The above demonstrates that the complainants have a number of methods they can use to contact the Customer Relations Team with their complaints.

Demographic Information

Ethnicity	Number of complaints received	% of Total
Asian/Asian British	2	3.1%
Black Caribbean	1	1.5%
Black/Black British	1	1.5%
Mixed/Mixed Other	1	1.5%
Not Stated	43	66.2%
White British	16	24.7%
White/White Mixed	1	1.5%
Total	65	100%

For equality monitoring purposes, staff have been encouraged to seek personal demographic information from people who make a complaint to help assess if there are groups of people who are proportionally complaining more or less and to explore the possible reasons. We have found that people who complain do not always wish to state their ethnicity.

The offer of the translation service and easy read versions of complaint responses are made available by the Customer Relations & Information Governance Service Manager to those complainants who need these.

Complaints from young people involving advocates

Between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022 three complaints were recorded as coming from young people, two directly, and one via an advocate.

The Customer Relations Information Governance Service Manager also meets BfFC teams and managers to reinforce the importance of capturing verbal complaints. Staff are encouraged to record and analyse comments or concerns, as many children's and young people's issues are resolved this way rather than using the complaints process. If the young person is unhappy but does not wish to make a formal complaint, the Customer Relations Team also offers to try to resolve matters informally.

Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman

Between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LG&SCO) received 16 representations from dissatisfied service users for issues relating to BfFC. This is an increase of 11 from the previous year. Of the 16 cases, the LGSCO assessed and investigated 4 cases. 3 cases were upheld and 1 case was not upheld. 6 cases had either not progressed through the complaints procedures and were referred back to BfFC. The remaining 6 cases were not within the LGSCO's jurisdiction to investigate or was closed after initial enquiry/assessment.

In respect of the upheld complaints, the LGSCO asked the Council/BfFC to apologise and provided financial redress. They also recommend some service improvements, all of which have been completed and evidence provided to the LGSCO. The LGSCO was satisfied that 100% of the remedies they recommended were actioned within timescales.

The LGSCO did not issue any formal reports finding maladministration by BfFC.

Learning from complaints

BfFC welcomes feedback from service users to inform the improvement of services. All compliments and complaints are logged and disseminated to managers. Issues arising from complaints, how the specific service has addressed them, and emerging themes are then reported to the senior leadership team and the Company Board and relevant committees. Where appropriate, learning events are held with key practitioners to draw out issues and learning, with findings disseminated to relevant services and teams. Two such learning events were held as part of the response to complaints – one centred on learning from a placement move for a child, and the other on a specific accommodation setting where three young people were placed together. Brief reports summarising the learning were disseminated across the children's social care teams, and incorporated in practice improvement meetings.

Key activities regarding learning from complaints as part of our improvement work in 2021/22 included:

- Practice expectations confirmed to staff to ensure complainants are spoken with and not only responded to in writing. This enables potential early resolution but also a deeper understanding of the complainant's issues raised.
- Team level training delivered to children's social care team around complaints – both how to avoid them in the first place, and how to respond when they are raised.
- Embedding the BfFC Quality Strategy, which includes how we engage with children and families and ensure their participation in planning and reviewing the support and services they receive
- The aligned BfFC Quality Assurance Operational Framework was also agreed and implemented, which sets out among its activities how we will collect the views of children and families (for example, our quarterly quality audits and success reviews include direct feedback and views from young people and families)
- A revised BfFC Engagement and Participation Strategy, which includes how we use these views to shape provision and will evidence how service delivery is impactful and makes a sustainable difference to the lives of children and families
- Using language that is trauma informed, empathic, evidence-based and naming the source of information when assessments or written reports are produced
- Adapting online forms on Mosaic records to demonstrate a trauma-informed approach.
- Areas of focus regarding practice improvement included ensuring
 - Assessments are co-produced with families; to reflect a parent and child's views and to be shared with them in a timely manner
 - Accurate, unambiguous and timely recordings on a child's records
 - Improving communication and clarity of information with parent carers on the PCNA pathway.

In 2021/22 these were the learning improvements BfFC focused on in the early help service:

- Data breaches are reported more swiftly and accurately as the Company's data breach procedures are used more effectively
- A range of improvements have been implemented in both practice and processes to mitigate potential complaints, including all-team retraining in information security and data protection when any breach -however minor - occurs
- Although the majority of internal learning opportunities have been virtual, a number of staff in managerial roles have completed HR core skills training which included: Challenging Conversation & Managing Team Dynamics/Conflict. Diversity & Cultural Competence. They have also attended the Managers' Communications Toolkit training.

In 2021/22 these were the learning improvements BfFC focused on in the SEND Service:

- Continuation of the communications working group as part of the SEND strategy helps identify and remedy poor communication and information for parent carers on the SEND processes and services available (led by the BfFC Head of Communications & Marketing)
- All improvements in SEND communications are published on the Reading Local Offer or BfFC website and a page on the [BfFC website](#) is dedicated to letting parent carers and young people know about these updates.
- Regular meetings are held between the BfFC Special Education Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) team and Reading Information, Advice and Support Service (IASS) to understand each other's processes and roles/responsibilities (maintaining independence and impartiality in doing so)

The DfE guidance asks for the Council or its representative - in this case BfFC - to ensure that we report the learning and service improvements implemented as a result of complaints. Some learning was pertinent to individual workers and led to bespoke advice and training. Some learning was shared in reminder to all staff regarding good practice and some learning led to review of services and processes.

Some individual and staff learning included:

1. Complaint (upheld)

The Education, Health and Care (EHC) Needs Assessment – Brighter Futures for Children applied local policy instead of legislation despite knowing a child was not accessing education and had been out of school for 5 months. This resulted in an 8-9 month delay and the child not receiving appropriate support.

BfFC failed to seek alternative provision. The parents made a formal request on three separate occasions for advice from a specially trained occupational therapist, physiotherapist and speech and language therapist but the LA did not follow this up.

Action

- The SEND team manager met with the family to agree and progress matters with regards to the individual case.
- An apology was issued on behalf of Brighter Futures for Children.

Learning

- Awareness was raised across the organisation of the Children Missing Education policy and how it should inform practice.
- Team discussions took place on how teams could improve joint working - internally and externally - around the challenge of persistent absence.
- Individual learning was addressed in relation to actions taken in response to parental requests

2. Complaint (upheld)

Complaint is in respect of an education placement not being identified for a young person in care. Complaint also referred to a lack of response to a request for a multi-agency meeting.

Action

- A multi-agency meeting was arranged and held in March 2022 with SEND, Children's Social Care and the Virtual School.
- An apology was given to the young person for the failure to identify a permanent school placement.
- The SEND team agreed additional funding for weekly package of education to be increase and the Virtual School agreed to fund activities not covered by other funding

Learning

- BfFC's has written a document outlining processes to be followed when placing a Child Looked After with an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP)
Escalation procedures have been reviewed where there are concerns about educational placement, to ensure these are up to date and clear.

3. Complaint (upheld)

Concerns were raised that letterbox contact had not been set up since an adoption was approved. Poor communication from BfFC regarding this matter.

Action

- The team manager in the Children Looked After team drafted letters to the children to set out, sensitively, the circumstances of their birth family, the efforts made to enable contact to take place and the reasons why they were unsuccessful in doing so. These letters also apologised for the failure to set up letterbox contact in a timely manner.

Learning

- The real need for a dedicated post to support the timely arrangement of letterbox contact. This post has now been created and recruited to, providing long-term reassurances of improved practice.

Complaints and concerns provide essential and valuable feedback from our service users. Listening and reflecting on examples of where we have not got it right can reveal or highlight opportunities for improvement (for example, a deficiency in practice, communication or service delivery).

Even if a complaint is not upheld, lessons can be learnt from that complaint with service developments and improvements as a result. The complaints process and the feedback gained is an integral part of the quality assurance process, which feeds into the development and monitoring of services.

BfFC recognises the need to improve the timescales for responding to complaints. The above table on timescales sets out the relevant data. Fortnightly reports have been provided to the senior leadership team, who shares this with service and team managers and highlights deadlines and responses needed. This has allowed for better tracking of the timeliness of complaints. This remains a priority area to be improved.

Subject Access Requests (SARs)

The Customer Relations Team processes all SARs requests for BfFC. These are open and closed children's social care cases (historical cases where paper and microfiche files are held at the records centre) and Special Education Needs (SEN) cases.

In 2021/22, the Customer Relations Team received 38 requests for records, 26 fewer than the 64 requests received in 2020/21 relating to BfFC.

Of the 38 requests received 28 requests were completed. The remaining 10 are waiting to be processed.

In total, a further 35 requests received between 2020-2022 are outstanding and waiting to be processed at the time of writing this report.

The main reasons for the backlog are as a result of the Customer Relations Team's functions being suspended between March 2020 and July 2020 which caused a backlog of requests being processed, along with the following:

- Restrictions posed by the pandemic meant records could not be retrieved from the archive for scanning.
- The move of paper records from Darwin Close to Bennet Road in early 2021 restricted access to the storage area.
- The lack of resource to redact files which range from a few hundred pages to over 3500 pages per file.
- Paper files need to be copied from microfiche and scanned before redactions can be completed. In SEND cases, information is held on the EMS (Education) system as well as shared files and emails. These have to be searched, converted to PDF and redacted before the file can be shared with the requestor.
- In all cases the Customer Relations Team and the Information Governance Team has kept in regular contact with requestors to ensure they were kept up to date on the progress of their requests.

Extra BfFC resource was deployed to help the Customer Relations team to clear backlogs. The Council is working on tendering a contract for the supply of new technology for redaction work and has also employed temporary staff to help address the backlog issue.

Compliments

In the year 2021/22, 64 compliments were received and logged for BfFC. These were received by the following teams:

- Children in Need – 1
- Children Looked After – 1
- CYPDT – 2
- Contact Service – 1
- Contracts & Commissioning – 1
- Early Help – 5
- Educational Psychologists – 1
- Family Intervention Teams – 1
- Family Workers – 6
- Fostering Team – 3
- Foster Carers – 2
- Multiple Teams within BfFC – 34
- Operations & Support Teams – 1
- Safeguarding – 1
- South-East Children’s Action Team – 2
- Targeted Youth Support Workers – 1
- West Area Team – 1

The following are some examples of compliments received:

Safeguarding

- I really appreciate that the amazing work you done for supporting my son to have better life being and great advice to me to how to keep good relationship with Y and how to dealing with some situations with my son and the father of my son. I always feel very comfortable to share information with you and always have good advice from you as well.

South-East Children's Action Team

- You helped me be more confident in my decision making and what it was that I was already achieving but not seeing myself. Having a friend as such to pick me up when I wasn't feeling quite myself but also someone with great ideas to help bring our family unit back together. Having someone there when I felt like I had no one who took the time and patience to understand me and my family's needs.

CYPDT

- “ [REDACTED] and you (J) are the best social workers I have known, I feel like you both really care. It's not just a job to you.”

Family Workers

- I just wanted to highlight that S's contribution to the programme and a particular young person was amazing!! Without S's commitment to this young person it would have been difficult to have been able to fully support her needs, however S did and the young person had an amazing time. This would not have been achieved without S's input and dedication. The young person attended all 4 days and it was just so evident as to how important this was for her.

West Area Team

- I want to send you a message to say thank you for being my social worker. I can't remember how long you have been my social worker for but it has been a long time. I have enjoyed my time with you. I am looking forward to looking for a job when I am 18. I am looking forward to working with L. I have grown up a lot since I first met you. I think you have done a great job being my social worker. Thank you so much.

Appendix B

Contact information: How to make a complaint

Some complaints can be sorted out by discussing your problem with your social worker or a manager. If you want to make a complaint, you can contact the Customer Relations Team by telephone, letter, in person, or by e-mail. Telephone the Customer Relations Team on 0118 937 2905 or e-mail: socialcare.complaints@reading.gov.uk.

If you wish to make your complaint to us in writing, our address is:

Customer Relations Team
Reading Borough Council
Floor 2 South Rear

Civic Offices
Bridge Street
Reading
RG1 2LU

You can also text us with your complaint, type SPKUP & your message to 81722. Your complaint will be recorded and if we can't sort out the problem immediately it will be passed for further investigation and action.

The Customer Relations Team can take your complaint over the telephone and explain the complaints procedure in more detail or send you a leaflet explaining how to complain. The leaflet is also available in council buildings or via the Brighter Futures for Children website (www.brighterfuturesforchildren.org). You can also use these contact details to tell us if you have a concern (but do not want to make a complaint) or if you want to make a compliment about a service.