



Complaints & Compliments Annual Report 2022-23

SUMMARY

An overview of complaints, compliments, SARs activity and performance for the period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

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Company number 11293709

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TO:	ADULT SOCIAL CARE, CHILDREN'S SERVICES & EDUCATION COMMITTEE		
DATE:	18 October 2023	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 2022 to 31 March 2023.

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 2022/23, 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 Information Rights Services Manager, who acts as the statutory Complaints 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 Information Rights Services Manager for the Council and is overseen by BFFC's Head of Communications & Compliance.

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 the financial year 2022/23 BfFC received 77 statutory complaints, which is an increase of 12 (18.46%) against the 65 received in 2021/22.

To give this some context, in 2022/23, 2,883 children in total were referred to children's social care, so the number of statutory complaints represents 2.7%. These referrals were regarding a mix of both new and existing children and young people. This compares to 2,479 referrals and 2.6% for 2021/22.

Of the 77 complaints received:

- 10 (13.0%) were resolved through alternative dispute resolution (ADR) by the social care teams.
- The remaining 67 (87.0%) progressed to a formal investigation, although one of these was subsequently withdrawn by the complainant once the investigation had commenced.

During this reporting period, 14 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 (2021/22). Of these 11, one then progressed to a Stage 3 investigation. We also received one further request for a Stage 3 investigation, although this was a progression of a Stage 2 complaint received in the previous reporting year (2021/22).

Both the Customer Relations Team, on BfFC's behalf, and BfFC's Communications & Compliance 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 2022/23 – 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.

Nevertheless, we recognise there is always room for improvement and we are continuously working to better the services offered to children and families.

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 Information Rights Services 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 other aspects of 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 Information Rights Services Manager administer this service on behalf of Brighter Futures for Children, under a Service Level Agreement. The BFFC Board, via its committees, 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. Children and families 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 for the Information Rights Services Manager (as the Complaints 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 Information Rights Services 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), Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000), Adoption and Children Act (2002), the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act (2003). and The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (2006).

This statutory guidance for local authority children's services on representations and complaints, [Getting the Best from Complaints](#), takes all of the above legislation into account.

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 the need for 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 2022/23

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 2022/23. The report shows there were 77 complaints statutory complaints received, an increase of 12 (18.46%) compared to the 65 received in 2021-22.

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 an increase of 12 (18.46%) in the number of complaints received compared to the previous year. Of the 77 complaints received, 10 were resolved informally through Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR), and one was withdrawn by the complainant. Of the remaining 66 complaints which were investigated to an outcome, 28 (42.4%) were responded to within timescale and 38 (57.6%) outside the agreed timescales. This compares to 22 (44%) and 28 (56%) respectively for 2021/22.

The top three themes for 2022/23 for all statutory complaints received were as detailed below. The figures for 2021/22 have been left in brackets for comparison.

- Staff conduct – 23 (29.9%) (2021/22 - 14 (21.5%));
- Quality of Service provided or received – 17 (22.1%) (2021/22 - 23 (35.4%); and
- Procedure – 14 (18.2%) (2021/22 - 13 (20%))

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

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.

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 Information Rights Services 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 Information Rights Services Manager delivers training on investigating and responding to statutory Stage 1 complaints and also on the corporate complaints procedure for BfFC staff. The Information Rights Services 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 is low, however, two face-to-face training sessions for operational managers were delivered in 2022/23.

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). ReachDeck will also translate and 'speak' web documents.

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 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 Information Rights Services Manager participates in the Southern Region Complaints Managers' Group and is the current 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 Information Rights Services 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 2022/23, children's social care received 77 statutory complaints, which is an increase of 12 (18.46%) compared to the 65 received in 2021/22.

During this reporting period, 14 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 (2021/22). Of these 11, one progressed to a Stage 3 investigation. We also received one further request for a Stage 3 investigation, although this was a progression of a Stage 2 complaint received in the previous reporting year (2021/22).

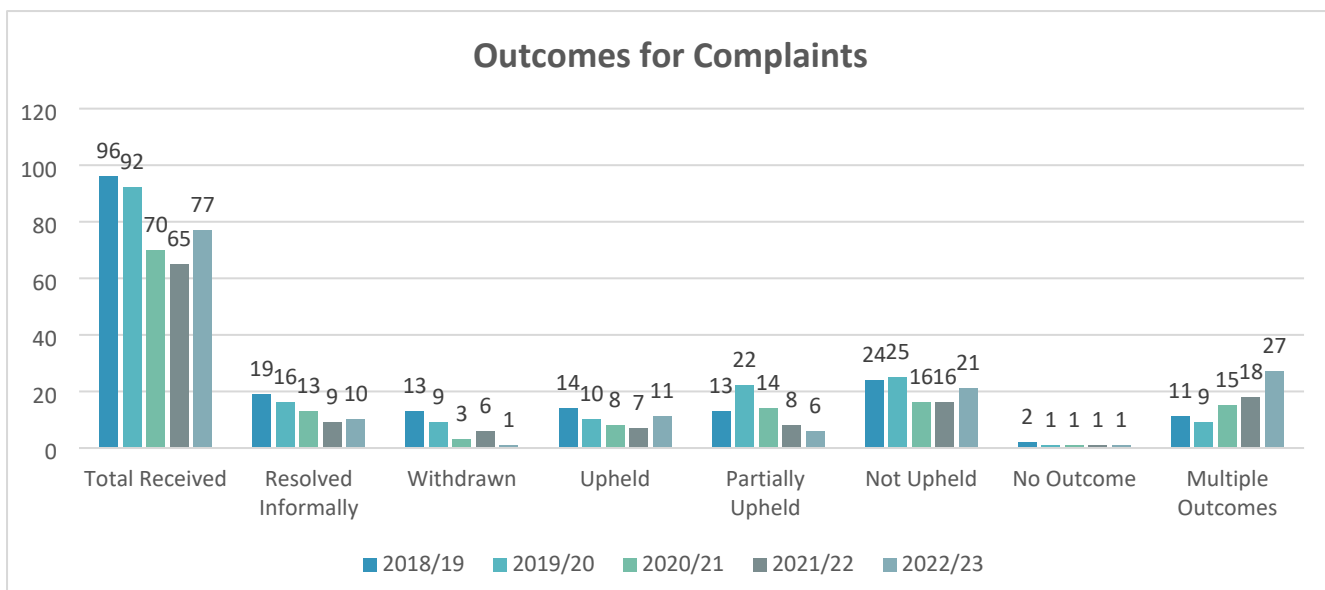
Of the 77 complaints received:

- 10 (13.0%) were resolved as representations informally through alternative dispute resolution (ADR) (Stage 0) by the social care teams.
- 1 (1.5%) of the remaining 67 complaints was withdrawn by the complainant following a resolution with the service after the investigation had commenced, leaving 66 (85.7%) which were investigated at Stage 1 to an outcome.

Of the 66, 28 (42.4%) were responded to within timescale, with the remaining 38 (57.6%) complaints responded to over timescale.

Of the 66 complaints investigated to an outcome, 11 (16.7%) (2021/22 = 7 (14%) were recorded as fully upheld, 6 (9.1%) (2021/22 = 8 (16%) as partially upheld, 21 (31.8%) (2021/22 = 16 (32%) as not upheld, and 1 (1.5%) (2021/22 = 1 (2%) as having no recordable outcome.

The remaining 27 (40.9%) (2021/22 = 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
*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%
2022/23	77	+ 18.46%	2,883	2.7%

*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	2022/23 Number	% of Total	2021/22 Number	% of Total
Upheld	11	16.7%	7	14%
Partially upheld	6	9.1%	8	16%
Not upheld	21	31.8%	16	32%
No outcome	1	1.5%	1	2%
Multiple outcomes	27	40.9%	18	36%
Total	66	100%	50	100%

Timescales

Reporting Year	Total Investigated	In Timescale	% of Total	Over Timescale	% of Total
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	to an Outcome				
2021/22	50	22	44%	28	56%
2022/23	66	28	42.4%	38	57.6%

	Total Resolved Informally	In timescale	% of Total	Over Timescale	% of Total
2021/22	9	6	66.7%	3	33.3%
2022/23	10	5	50%	5	50%

Main theme of all complaints received during 2021/23

(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	2022/23 Number	% of Total	2021/22 Number	% of Total
Communication	11	14.2%	7	10.8%
Failure to Resolve Issue	1	1.3%	0	0
Financial Issue	1	1.3%	0	0
Lack of Support	10	13.0%	8	12.3%
Procedure	14	18.2%	13	20.0%
Quality of service provided	17	22.1%	23	35.4%
Staff conduct	23	29.9%	14	21.5%
Total	77	100%	65	100%

Who the complaint was received from

Who made the complaint	2022/23 Number	% of Total	2021/22 Number	% of Total
Advocate*	6	7.8%	5	7.7%
Child *	0	0	1	1.5%
Extended Family (Siblings, Aunts & Uncles, and Grandparents)	8	10.4%	0	0
Friend	0	0	1	1.5%
Landlord	0	0	1	1.5%
Parent (Incl. Adopted or Foster Parents & Guardians)	54	70.1%	42	64.6%
Professional (Care Worker,	1	1.3%	3	4.6%

Social Worker, etc)				
Self **	8	10.4%	12	18.6%
Total	77	100%	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 open to the service in their own right and are aged over 12.

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 54 complaints received from parents, 22 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.

Statutory complaints received by team

Team	2022/23 No. of Complaints	%
Children Looked After Team	16	20.8%
Children & Young People's Disability Team	3	3.9%
Early Help Team	0	0
Family & Friends	1	1.3%
Fostering Service	1	1.3%
Leaving Care Team	5	6.5%
Together for Families Teams	51	66.2%
Total	77	100%

The three areas which received the highest number of complaints were the Together for Families Teams with 51 (66.2%), the Children Looked After Team with 16 (20.8%), and the Leaving Care Team with 5 (6.5%). This can mainly be attributed to the challenging circumstances in which these particular services work in and the volume of their direct contact with children and families.

Methods used to make a complaint

Method	2022/23 Number	% of Total	2021/22 Number	% of Total
Email	51	66.2%	45	69.2%
Letter	3	3.9%	3	4.6%
Telephone	17	22.1%	10	15.4%
Webform	6	7.8%	7	10.8%
Total	77	100%	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	2022/23 Number of	% of Total	2021/22	% of Total
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	Complaints Received		Number of complaints received	
Asian/Asian British	3	3.9%	2	3.1%
Black or Black British	1	1.3%	1	1.5%
Black or Black British / Black Caribbean	3	3.9%	0	0
Black or Black British / Black African	2	2.6%	1	1.5%
Mixed Black & White	1	1.3%	1	1.5%
Mixed White & Asian	3	3.9%		
Mixed White & Black Caribbean	6	7.8%		
Mixed Other	3	3.9%		
Not Stated	22	28.5%	43	66.2%
Other White European	1	1.3%		
White British	31	40.3%	16	24.7%
White Other	1	1.3%	1	1.5%
Total	77	100%	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.

The offer of the translation service and easy read versions of complaint responses are made available by the Information Rights Services Manager to those complainants who need these.

Complaints from young people involving advocates

Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023 six complaints were recorded as coming from young people via an advocate.

The Information Rights Services Manager also meets BfC 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 2022 and 31 March 2023, the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LG&SCO) received 23 representations from dissatisfied service users for issues relating to BfC. This is an increase of 7 from the previous year.

Of the 23 cases, the LGSCO assessed nine cases for investigation. Of these, five cases were upheld and two cases were not upheld. One is awaiting an outcome and one is yet to be investigated.

In respect of the five upheld complaints, the LGSCO asked the Council/BfC to apologise and provided financial redress. They also recommend some service improvements.

Of the remaining 14 cases, 11 were assessed but not investigated as they were either out of time, not within the LGSCO's jurisdiction to investigate or was closed after initial enquiry/assessment. Three cases were deemed premature and passed back to BfC to investigate as they had not progressed through the complaints' procedures.

The LGSCO will issue one formal report finding maladministration by BfC, however this will not be published in order to safeguard the complainant. This matter has been scrutinised by the BfC Board, CMT and Lead Councillors. All comments and learning are being addressed and reassurance has been sent to the LGSCO.

Learning from complaints

BfC 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 reported to both the Senior Leadership Team, the Company's Audit and Risk committee and the Company's Quality Improvement committee.

Where appropriate, learning events are held with key practitioners to draw out issues and learning, with findings disseminated to relevant services and teams.

In 2022/23 these were the learning improvements BfC focused on:

- Addressing the improvements needed in compliance by appointing a full time Compliance, Policy and Process Officer and incorporating compliance into the Head of Communication's role and key responsibilities
- Introducing new and revised communications about the complaints process, reviewing the wording on the website and improving accessibility to the complaints' procedure
- Introducing a new digital leaflet on the complaints' procedure for children and young people in care or with past experience of being in care and publicising this internally and externally.

The DfE guidance asks for the Council or its representative - in this case BfC - 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 (this part upheld)

Part of a parent's complaint was that an assessment, completed in October 2021, has not been provided to the parent, despite a request to the social worker.

Outcome

The Complaints Manager investigated and could not find evidence of the assessment having been shared. A sincere apology was issued to the parent, the assessment was provided and this part of their complaint was upheld.

Learning

BFFC has now implemented a system where social work practitioners must record the date when a copy of the single assessment is shared with a parent/carer/young person before it is completed.

2. Complaint (Partially upheld)

A parent raised concerns about a social worker's communication skills and preparedness for the visit which they made to the parent's home. The parent complained this made them feel very stressed and oppressed.

Outcome

A letter was sent to the parent expressing concern that the social worker's communication made them feel stressed and oppressed. The letter said that the Complaints Manager's investigation found that the social worker reflected a different version of events and was clear that they did not intend to communicate in a way to make the parent feel like this, but accepted this was how the parent had felt.

Learning

The social worker took on the feedback in order to further improve their communication skills and practice with families. Please note: Managers at BFFC routinely observe social workers' practice and through this process do identify and address any cause for concern.

3. Complaint (upheld)

BFFC delayed its decision making regarding a family's request for a Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) following an occupational therapy assessment on their child's needs.

Outcome

The relevant officers were reminded that the DFG process does not have a predilection for those with a physical disability.

Learning

As the DFG process can be a stressful and a complicated process to explain and to ensure families have time to process information in their own time, written information (in the form of a leaflet) explaining key terms, trigger points of the process, when a stage starts, ends and another stage starts and expected timescales was produced.

4. Complaint (upheld)

The family complained that the allocated occupational therapist contacted their daughter's school and discussed their daughter's personal information without parental consent.

Outcome

The complaint was investigated and found to be proven. A letter of apology was written to the parent, with details of measures now in place to prevent this from happening in future.

Learning

BFFC put in place appropriate checks and balances to ensure that appropriate parental consent form is filled in, signed and visible on file. Checks are made before any third party is approached to ensure parental consent has been obtained.

Further learning

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.

To build on learning in previous years, we gave a commitment during the presentation of last year's annual report to contact complainants for their views on how to improve the complaints process.

We have sent a survey out to complainants asking for feedback on ways to improve the complaints process and will be looking at and actioning improvements over the next 12 months. We will provide an update on the survey findings in the next annual report.

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 and/or Disabilities (SEND) cases.

In 2022/23, the Customer Relations Team received 59 requests for records, 21 more than the 38 requests received in 2021/22 relating to BFFC.

Of the 59 requests received 39 requests were completed. The remaining 20 cases are waiting to be processed as at the end of March 2023, this number would have altered by the time this report is presented at ACE.

A further 14 requests received between 2020 and March 2023 are outstanding and waiting to be processed at the time of writing this report.

The main reasons for the backlog are as follows:

- Restrictions posed by the pandemic meant records could not be retrieved from the archive for scanning between March-July 2020.
- 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 clear backlogs, which in the report to this Committee noted 35 cases in the backlog. The Council has purchased new software for the redaction work, at the time of writing this report we are waiting for the contract to be signed with a view to implementation taking place in July & August 2023.

Compliments

In the year 2022/23, 50 compliments were received and logged for BFFC.

Teams that were complimented included the Early Years SEND Team, the Children & Young People's Disability Service, the Independent Fostering Agency, Pinecroft and Cressingham children's homes, Children's Social Care and our children's centres.

Here are some examples of compliments received:

Examples:

- **For social workers** - I wanted to write to you to thank you for your support and for X over the last 9 months or so. X is excellent at her job and we have really benefitted from having her allocated to us. She has been dependable and reliable – doing things like making phone calls or referrals when she says she will – as well as punctual. She has been honest and open with us and kept us informed of everything along the way, even when it meant telling us things we didn't want to hear.
Her gentle, wise and non-combative approach made her a really good person to ask for advice or to explore issues with together and to discover a suitable way forward together. We will miss her support enormously. Thank you both again.
- **For foster carers** - To all community carers who took care of Y. Many thanks from all the our family. Your care was exceptional.
- **For Pinecroft children's home** - Thank you so much for all you do for my son and my whole family. It has been life changing to have more support so we as a family can get out of the house and even when at the home we can be together in the lounge as this just isn't possible when we are all home. Importantly I know my son is not sad and happy when with you. It's a very special place with caring and warm staff. Thank you everybody for all you do.

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. Leaflets for adults and for children & young people are also available in council buildings or via the Brighter Futures for Children website on the following page:

<https://brighterfuturesforchildren.org/about/compliments-and-complaints/>.

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.

See Addendum – Learning from Complaints – drafted by Fiona Betts, Lead for Quality Assurance.