



Complaints & Compliments Annual Report 2023-24

SUMMARY

An overview of complaints, compliments, SARs activity and performance for the period from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

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TO:	ADULT SOCIAL CARE, CHILDREN'S SERVICES & EDUCATION COMMITTEE		
DATE:	15 January 2025	AGENDA ITEM:	
TITLE:	BFFC ANNUAL COMPLAINTS & COMPLIMENTS REPORT 2023-24		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR HOSKIN	PORTFOLIO:	CHILDREN'S SERVICES
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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 2023 to 31 March 2024.

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. Subject Access Requests (SARs) are also covered

Family Help and Safeguarding, which includes children's social care and early help and prevention, 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 2023/24, 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 Service Level Agreement (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 2023/24 BFFC received 75 statutory complaints, which is a decrease of 2 (2.6%) against the 77 received in 2022/23.

To give this some context, in 2023/24, 3,003 children in total were referred into children's social care, so the number of statutory complaints represents 2.5%. These referrals were regarding a mix of both new and existing children and young people. This compares to 2,843 referrals and 2.7% for 2022/23.

Of the **75** complaints received:

- **17** (13.0%) were resolved through alternative dispute resolution (ADR) by the social care teams.
- The remaining **58** (87.0%) progressed to a formal investigation, although one of these was subsequently withdrawn by the complainant once the investigation had commenced and **57** were investigated to outcome.

During this reporting period, **10** complaints progressed to a Stage 2 investigation. Some of these relate to Stage 1 complaints received in this reporting year, and some to Stage 1 complaints received in the previous reporting year (2022/23). There were also 4 cases that were reviewed by a Stage 3 review panel.

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 2023/24 – 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 Family Help & Safeguarding 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 2023/24

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 2023/24. The report shows there were 75 complaints statutory complaints received, a decrease of 2 (2.6%) compared to the 77 received in 2022-23.

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 independent 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 complaint's 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 decrease of 2 (2.6%) in the number of complaints received compared to the previous year. Of the 75 complaints received, 17 (22.7%) were resolved informally through Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR), and one (1.3%) was withdrawn by the complainant. Of the remaining 57 complaints which were investigated to an outcome, 25 (43.9%) were responded to within timescale and 32 (56.1%) outside the agreed timescales. This compares to 28 (42.4%) and 38 (57.6%) respectively for 2022/23, and 22 (44%) and 28 (56%) respectively for 2021/22.

The top three themes for 2023/24 for all statutory complaints received were as detailed below. The figures for 2022/23 and 2021/22 have been given for comparison.

- Quality of service provided or received = 42 (56.0%) (2022/23) = (17 (22.1%) (2021/22) = 23 (35.4%);
- Staff conduct = 26 (34.7%) (2022/23 = 23 (29.9%) (2021/22) = 14 (21.5%);
- Communication = 6 (8.0%) (previously not a top-3 theme)

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.

Communication complaints are mainly about the poor communication, or lack of, taken by a team or individual social worker relating to a specific case.

As stated during this reporting period, 10 complaints progressed to a Stage 2 investigation. And 4 progressed to Stage 3 investigation by a review panel. Two of these 10 Stage 2's relates to Stage 1 complaints from the 21/22 reporting period, one of the Stage 2 requests were delayed by the complainants due to unusual circumstances and accepted by BFFC for investigation in the best interest of the young people involved. The Stage 1 did not uphold the complaints, however the independent investigation at Stage 2 upheld the majority of the complaints.

The remaining case was investigated at Stage 2 and progressed to Stage 3 in this reporting period, whilst the Stage 2 upheld or partially upheld the majority of the complaints, the complainant requested a Stage 3 and the outcome was that that the stage 3 review panel agreed with the Stage 2 investigation outcomes. The remaining 8 Stage 2 investigations came from Stage 1 complaints received in this reporting year (23/24).

Of the 8 Stage 2 investigations by independent investigators, 3 agreed with the Stage 1 outcomes and did not uphold the complaints, 4 Stage 2 investigations disagreed with the not upheld outcomes at Stage 1 and either fully or partially upheld the complaints and the remaining one was ongoing into reporting period 24/25.

Of these 8, three progressed to a Stage 3 review panel, one case was not upheld at Stage 2 but the Stage 3 review panel upheld the complaint, one case was upheld by the Stage 2 investigators however the adjudicator disagreed with the Stage 2 outcomes and partially upheld the complaints,

but the Stage 3 review agreed with the Stage 2 findings. The remaining case was heard by the review panel despite the complaints being upheld at Stage 2 as the complainant raised concerns about processes followed by BFFC however the review panel did not uphold this.

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 via its Audit and Risk Committee, 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 2023/24. 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.

The Information Rights Services Manager attends Team Meetings to provide training and advice to Teams and Senior Managers when required. The Customer Relations Team has also improved processes to ensure upcoming responses are discussed and monitored at weekly meetings. A case management system was introduced in July 2024 to assist with managing complaints across the Council and includes BFFC social care statutory complaints. Customers are able to log complaints via the BFFC or RBC website into the new RBC case management system. A new webform was created and went live in July 2024.

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. Monthly reports, in the form of a compliance dashboard, are prepared for the BFFC Board, via its Audit and Risk Committee and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and for the Council's Corporate Management Team (CMT).

The complaints process was internally audited in 2023/24 and was given a 'Good' assurance. All of the recommended actions (minor) were implemented, including signposting complainants to

advocacy services they may wish to engage as part of the complaint process. These, plus update leaflets are all on the BfFC website's [compliments and complaints](#) page.

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 2023/24, children's social care received 75 statutory complaints, which is a decrease of 2 (2.6%) compared to the 77 received in 2022/23.

During this reporting period, 10 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 (2022/23). Of these 10, one progressed to a Stage 3 investigation.

Of the 75 complaints received:

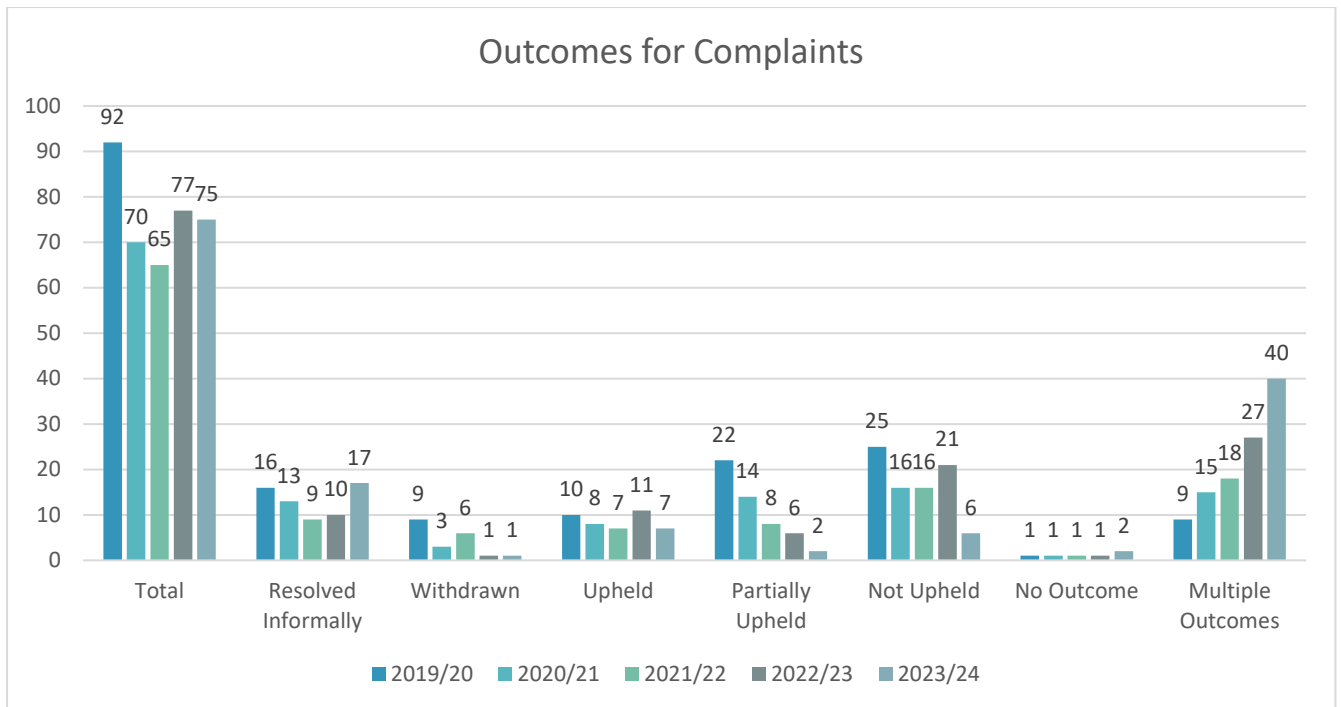
- 17 (22.70%) were resolved as representations informally through alternative dispute resolution (ADR) (Stage 0) by the social care teams.
- 1 (1.3%) of the remaining 57 complaints was withdrawn by the complainant following a resolution with the service after the investigation had commenced, leaving 57 (76.0%) which were investigated at Stage 1 to an outcome.

Of the 57, 25 (43.9%) were responded to within timescale, with the remaining 32 (56.1%) complaints responded to over timescale.

Of the 57 complaints investigated to an outcome, 7 (12.3%) (2022/23 = 11 (16.7%) (2021/22 = 7 (14%) were recorded as fully upheld, 2 (3.5%) (2022/23 = 6 (9.1%) (2021/22 = 8 (16%) as partially upheld, 6 (10.5%) (2022/23 = 21 (31.8%) (2021/22 = 16 (32%) as not upheld, and 2 (3.5%) (2022/23 = 1 (1.5%) (2021/22 = 1 (2%) as having no recordable outcome.

The remaining 40 (70.2%) (2022/23 = 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%
2023/24	75	-2.6%	3,003	2.5%

*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	2023/24 Number	% of Total	2022/23 Number	% of Total	2021/22 Number	% of Total
Upheld	7	12.3%	11	16.7%	7	14%
Partially upheld	2	3.5%	6	9.1%	8	16%
Not upheld	6	10.5%	21	31.8%	16	32%
No outcome	2	3.5%	1	1.5%	1	2%
Multiple outcomes	40	70.2%	27	40.9%	18	36%

Total	57	100%	66	100%	50	100%
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Timescales

Reporting Year	Total Investigated to an Outcome	In Timescale	% of Total	Over Timescale	% of Total
2021/22	50	22	44%	28	56%
2022/23	66	28	42.4%	38	57.6%
2023/24	57	25	43.9%	32	56.1%

	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%
2023/24	17	7	41.2%	10	58.8%

Main theme of all complaints received during 2023/24

(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	2023/24 Number	% of Total	2022/23 Number	% of Total	2021/22 Number	% of Total
Communication	6	8.0%	11	14.2%	7	10.8%
Failure to Resolve Issue	0	0	1	1.3%	0	0
Financial Issue	1	1.3%	1	1.3%	0	0
Lack of Support	0	0	10	13.0%	8	12.3%
Procedure	0	0	14	18.2%	13	20.0%
Quality of service provided	42	56.0%	17	22.1%	23	35.4%
Staff conduct	26	34.7%	23	29.9%	14	21.5%
Total	75	100%	77	100%	65	100%

Who the complaint was received from

Who made the complaint	2023/24 Number	% of Total	2022/23 Number	% of Total	2021/22 Number	% of Total
Advocate*	1	1.3%	6	7.8%	5	7.7%
Child *	1	1.3%	0	0	1	1.5%
Extended Family (Siblings, Aunts & Uncles, and Grandparents)	9	12.1%	8	10.4%	0	0
Friend	0	0	0	0	1	1.5%

Landlord	0	0	0	0	1	1.5%
Parent (Incl. Adopted or Foster Parents & Guardians)	63	84.0%	54	70.1%	42	64.6%
Professional (Care Worker, Social Worker, etc)	0	0	1	1.3%	3	4.6%
Self **	1	1.3%	8	10.4%	12	18.6%
Total	75	100%	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 63 complaints received from parents, 14 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	2023/24 No. of Complaints	%	2022/23 No. of Complaints	%
Children Looked After Team	8	10.7%	16	20.8%
Children's Single Point of Access	3	4.0%		
Children & Young People's Disability Team	15	20.0%	3	3.9%
Early Help Team	0	0	0	0
Family & Friends	0	0	1	1.3%
Fostering Service	0	0	1	1.3%
Leaving Care Team	2	2.7%	5	6.5%
Together for Families Teams	47	62.6%	51	66.2%
Total	75	100%	77	100%

The three areas which received the highest number of complaints were the Together for Families Teams (TFF) with 47 (62.6%), the Children & Young Person's Disability Team (CYPDT) with 15 (20.0%), and the Children Looked After Team (CLA) with 8 (10.7%). This can mainly be attributed to the high volume of children currently open to these services compared to others listed above and 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	2023/24 Number	% of Total	2022/23 Number	% of Total	2021/22 Number	% of Total
Email	51	68.0%	51	66.2%	45	69.2%
Letter	1	1.3%	3	3.9%	3	4.6%
Telephone	17	22.7%	17	22.1%	10	15.4%
Webform	6	8.0%	6	7.8%	7	10.8%
Total	75	100%	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	2023/24 Number of Complaints Received	% of Total	2022/23 Number of Complaints Received	% of Total	2021/22 Number of complaints received	% of Total
Asian/Asian British	2	2.7%	3	3.9%	2	3.1%
Black or Black British	4	5.3%	1	1.3%	1	1.5%
Black or Black British / Black Caribbean	3	4.0%	3	3.9%	0	0
Black or Black British / Black African	2	2.7%	2	2.6%	1	1.5%
Mixed Black & White	0	0	1	1.3%	1	1.5%
Mixed Black & Asian	1	1.3%				
Mixed White & Asian	3	4.0%	3	3.9%		
Mixed White & Black African	1	1.3%				
Mixed White & Black Caribbean	6	8.0%	6	7.8%		
Mixed Other	3	4.0%	3	3.9%		
Not Stated	14	18.7%	22	28.5%	43	66.2%
Other White European	1	1.3%	1	1.3%		
White British	34	45.4%	31	40.3%	16	24.7%
White Other	1	1.3%	1	1.3%	1	1.5%
Total	75	100%	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 2023 and 31 March 2024, two complaints were recorded as coming from young people via an advocate.

BfFC staff ensure that children are given information on their advocacy and rights at each CLA review, they are also made aware of their right to complain about the service they receive.

The Information Rights Services 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 through mediation.

Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman

Between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024, the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LG&SCO) received 8 representations from dissatisfied service users for issues relating to BfFC. This is an decrease of 15 from the previous year.

Of the 8 cases, the LGSCO assessed all 8 and investigated 2. One was upheld the other is awaiting a final outcome.

In respect of the one case upheld, the LGSCO asked the Council/BfFC to apologise, provided financial redress and improve the information about advocacy providers on the website.

Of the remaining 6 cases, 2 were deemed premature and investigated by BfFC, the remaining 4 were all assessed but not investigated as they were either, not within the LGSCO's jurisdiction to investigate or was closed after initial enquiry/assessment.

There were no formal public reports issued in 2023/24.

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 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 2023/24, we held two key learning events relating to complaints. The first a presentation at a service-wide meeting highlighting the summary findings regarding complaints made about our services and support, and exploring how to improve and sustain good practice as a result. The second was a learning event centred on findings from an Ombudsman case from 22/23 financial year.

The whole service meeting was held on 5 July 2023 and considered what we have heard from recent complaints and Ombudsman reports over the past year. Within the meeting, we explored one theme

in more detail (domestic abuse – in relation to a complaint (Mr D) that resulted in an Ombudsman report), and confirmed what good practice looks like in the area. The session concluded with a reminder of national learning from child safeguarding practice reviews (CSPRs) with domestic abuse as a factor.

As part of practice improvement learning from complaints, the detailed issue exploration used an anonymised scenario drawing from the complaint, and asked participants to consider a range of questions based on the complaint findings. **These included:**

1. What are your past experiences in working with similar families / dynamics?
2. What are the challenges and potential barriers to working with this family?
3. What might be potential triggers for complaints in this case?
4. What knowledge, skills and behaviours will be important for practitioners?

We highlighted key learning from that complaint that included:

- Avoiding taking a ‘process’ response rather than a human response
- The importance of being heard – how we might avoid escalation
- Exploring the relationship between controlling behaviours and allegations of domestic abuse
- Making time to reflect and seek support
- Working with challenging behaviours – symptoms and causes: trauma

We highlighted what good practice looks like when completing assessment and ensuring the participation and engagement of all parties in our assessment and intervention, as well as looking at good quality management support.

Having also presented national learning along the same themes as highlighted in the complaint, we concluded the session with small group reflection:

- Reflect on what you might do differently in the future to avoid potential complaints?
- How would you respond to a complaint like this if it arose?
- What do you need from each other and the organisation to support practice?

Following on from another Ombudsman case, we held a learning event for the service to highlight the Ombudsman’s findings and practice improvements to be implement (Child A).

Within the session, a background to the case was presented, alongside the findings from an independent management review and the Ombudsman. The session focused on three key learning points:

1. Child-centred practice
2. Assessing risk
3. Timely interventions

For each theme, we highlighted skills, knowledge and behaviour relating to the area of practice before holding small group discussions with set questions. For each theme, we then specified the key learning points, stressing both organisational expectations about practice and where support

and resources could be accessed to strengthen practice. We linked our learning back to current areas of focus in our improvement work (for example, writing to the child; risk assessment; writing quality plans etc.), and concluded by asking participants to reflect on their key learning from the event, and to identify what further training and support they required. The session was well-received, with feedback from the 60 participants including that the style of learning event supported case practice development and learning.

Some individual and staff learning included:

1. Complaint (this part upheld)

BFFC took unnecessary legal actions against struggling families instead of increasing well-being services capacity. The decision to initiate care proceedings was unwarranted as there was no change in care circumstances.

Outcome - complaint was investigated to stage 2. BFFC apologise for failing to advise the family in writing that they had held LGMs in relation to their children and a decision had been taken to instigate Care Proceedings. That at the point the case was to be issued, the Local Authority failed to progress its application for 5 months which was inappropriate and not in line with best practice.

Learning

Social care staff to clearly explain court processes to parents, carers and where appropriate to young people and for robust raking of court cases to be put in place.

2. Complaint (Partially upheld)

A parent raised concerns that there was a preparing for adulthood meeting to decide whether her child would meet the criteria for transition support from child to adult social care. She was not part of this meeting and did not get told of the outcome, meaning that she was denied the opportunity to appeal it. She did not fully understand that there wouldn't be any support for him once he turned 18.

Outcome – Apology given to parent that she was unable to get through to the individuals that she needed to speak to. Explained that the phone lines are monitored by Business Support staff and sometimes it can go through to the wrong teams. The PfA Team decided to complete a Care Act assessment.

Learning

There needs to be better communication between BFFC and RBC's Adult Social Care going forward. There needs to be better communication between RBC, the PfA Team and families on PfA panel decisions and next steps.

A reminder to be sent to all CYPDT staff of the importance to follow through identified actions to prevent similar issues coming up in the future.

3. Complaint (upheld)

Initial Child Protection Conference was changed due to the report not being completed on time. Concerned that reports are not sent out and generally getting the report the night before not adequate as it contained information from the last social worker's report.

Outcome

In line with BfC policy and this was challenged by the Chairperson and escalated to the Team Manager who addressed this as aware that ICPC reports are due to be with families no later than 72 hours before the conference.

Learning

SWs to ensure that all reports are shared with parents and professionals in a timely manner in accordance with BfC procedure and to ensure that future Child In Need meetings are held every 4-6 weeks. To arrange a Family Group Conference/Family Network meeting to support the family.

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.

Subject Access Requests (SARs)

The Customer Relations Team processes all SARs requests for BfC. 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 2023/24, the Customer Relations Team received 75 requests for records, 16 more than the 59 requests received in 2022/23 relating to BfC.

Of the 75 requests received 71 requests were completed. The remaining 4 cases are waiting to be processed as at the end of March 2024, this number would have altered by the time this report is presented at ACE.

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 BfC 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 2023/24, 14 compliments were received and logged for BFFC.

Teams that were complimented included the Early Help, Pinecroft and Cressingham children's homes, Together for Families Teams and the Company.

A compliment was received for the Information Rights Services Manager for assisting a complainant who required adjustments with managing their complaint with professionalism and impartiality:

'I formally thank you for the warm welcome you gave us when we met in reception. It's small touches like these from you and the chair which helped to make the meeting go so smoothly. So thank you. I'm very happy for my thanks to you and the chair be recorded in the report on the meeting if this is appropriate.

'Finally I would like to add my thanks again for all you have done over the last 3 years since I was asked to advocate for this family. I can't stress this enough. Over the last 3 years you have done a great deal to move things forward. Sometimes acting as advocate is easy at other times because of complexity of issues things are more difficult. However, throughout everything you have always been supportive and professional and appreciated that I have only been trying to have recommendations adopted and A's concerns understood.'

Here are some examples of compliments received:

Examples:

- **For social workers** - Please can you also pass on my thanks to EL, A's new social worker. I've not met EL. However, A says she is very supportive. They get on well together, so I feel her support needs to be recognised.
- Dear E, X has come on so much in the past few weeks he's happy out. Thank you for all your help I will never forget you and will keep you posted on his progress
- **Contracts & Commissioning** - I would like to personally thank you for being such a proactive and supportive local authority during this period. You and the team at Brighter Futures for Children have been exceptional, you have gone above and beyond to try and support the providers going through this new Ofsted process. The support groups offered, continual guidance and advice, links to briefings such as these have been absolutely critical in building the confidence to move forward with our application and registration.
- I could not speak more highly of you all, phenomenal support throughout and I sincerely thank you.
- **Leaving Care Team** - I wanted to take a moment to express my deepest gratitude for being an exceptional support worker throughout my journey. Your unwavering dedication, compassion, and positive spirit have had a profound impact on me. Your constant encouragement and belief in my potential have motivated me to pursue my dreams fearlessly. I was truly fortunate to have you as my guiding light and invaluable companion. Thank you, SW, for all that you did.
- **For Pinecroft children's home** – Loved the facilities, staff really approachable, 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, by email or via the BfFC website on its [compliments and complaints](#) page.

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](#).

You can also make a complaint about children's social care via the Reading Borough Council website: [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 you can do so here: [Compliment](#).