achieving for children

Champions for children and families

LONDON BOROUGH OF RICHMOND UPON THAMES

Annual Complaints Report
Children's Social Care, Achieving for Children (London Borough of Richmond)
2025-26

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1. Introduction

1.1 This report is produced annually as a statutory requirement for the London Borough of Richmond: it provides a summary analysis of social care complaints within Richmond Children's Services.

1.2 There is a duty on all local authorities to maintain and operate a complaints procedure for children's social care services.

1.3 Children's Social Care complaints for Richmond Council (Achieving for Children) are managed within the remit of the Resident Engagement Service. The Statutory Complaints Team currently comprises a Complaints Manager, which is a statutory requirement, supported by two complaints officers. The Statutory Complaints Team sit within the same management structure as the Corporate and Ombudsman Complaints Team.

1.4 The Complaints Team is an important corporate function within the Council. Its role is to support the organisation to ensure that the Council and Achieving for Children have effective and efficient complaints procedures, in line with best practice and statutory requirements. The Complaints Team also have responsibility to train and support Council officers to respond effectively to complaints and ensure learning from complaints feeds directly into service improvement.

2. Executive Summary

2.1 There is a legal requirement to have in place a complaints procedure and produce an annual report for complaints about the Council's actions under Part 3 and some of Parts 4 and 5 of the Children's Act 1989.

2.2 The statutory complaints procedure is a 3-stage procedure with recourse to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman if the Council is unable to resolve the complaint.

2.3 Learning from complaints this year highlighted the importance of clear communication and engagement with children, young people, parents and carers, ensuring families are kept informed and involved in decisions affecting them. It also reinforced the need for accurate record-keeping, effective management oversight and strong care planning processes. In addition, learning identified opportunities to strengthen partnership working, improve support for children and families with diverse needs, and ensure services and placements are coordinated safely and effectively.

2.4 Statutory complaint numbers have increased; across all 3 stages of the Statutory complaints process, 45 complaints were closed compared to 26 last year which is a 73% increase. 33 were at stage 1 and 10 were at stage 2. 2 stage 3 complaints were completed this year.

2.5 The increase appears to reflect a combination of factors, including increased complexity within children's social care, a significant rise in placement-related concerns, wider pressures in the children's placement market and the increased use of AI tools by complainants to help prepare quicker and more detailed complaints.

2.6 Of the 33 Stage 1 complaints the majority were for the Safeguarding (10 complaints) and Leaving Care Team (10 complaints); both services received the same number of complaints.

2.7 At stage 1, this year, placement issues emerged as the most frequent principal issue, raised in 11 complaints, representing a significant increase compared to three complaints in the previous year. In contrast, last year's most prominent issue was lack of support, which reduced from seven complaints to six this year, although it remains a key theme.

2.8 Most stage 1 complaints were partly upheld (13 of the 33 complaints), 11 were not upheld and nine were fully upheld.

2.9 This year 67% of Stage 1 statutory complaints were responded to on time compared to 42% last year. Additionally, 80% of Stage 2 statutory complaints were on time.

2.10 This year the Complaints Team have received 11 complaints directly from young people at Stage 1 compared to four in the previous year. This increase represents a third of complaints and reflects Ofsted's recognition of the strong role that children in care and care leavers play in shaping services at Achieving for Children.

2.11 This year Achieving for Children completed 63 Stage 1 corporate complaints, which is a 15% increase on the 55 stage 1 corporate complaints last year. 36 escalated to Stage 2 which is a 64% increase on the 22 Stage 2 complaints last year. 89% of stage 1 corporate complaints were on time and 78% of Stage 2 corporate complaints were on time.

2.12 During 2025/26 eight Ombudsman enquiries and/or investigations were completed by the LGSCO for Achieving for Children. This is 50% lower than the 16 in 2024/25. The LGSCO decided an additional five enquiries regarding Achieving for Children but they were not passed to the Council as they were deemed by the Ombudsman to be either incomplete or invalid. Only three of the eight complaints progressed to a formal investigation by the Ombudsman following assessment. All were for SEND.

2.13 Section 16 of this report sets out key achievements this year including the Complaints Team.

3. Legislation

3.1 There is a legal requirement for the Local Authority to have in place a complaints procedure, in accordance with Sections 24(D) and 26 of the Children Act 1989 and the Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 and

the accompanying statutory guidance published by the DfE: Getting the Best from Complaints: Social Care Complaints and Representations for Children, Young People and Others (01.09.2006) for the management of social care complaints.

3.2 The complaints procedure covers complaints about the actions of children's social care services under Part 3 and some of Parts 4 and 5 of the Children's Act 1989. These are Children in Need, Looked after Children/Care Leavers, Special Guardianship Support and post-adoption support. The following areas tend to be exempt; Early Help, Child Protection, S47 enquiries and conferences, assessments for potential foster carers and adopters, foster carer registration and Section 7 and 37 court reports. Achieving for Children may decide to investigate these areas under other procedures, such as the Council's corporate complaints process or the child protection conference complaints process.

3.3 There is also a legal duty for the Local Authority to have in place advocacy arrangements for children and care leavers who wish to make representations or complaints regarding Children's services and their care pursuant to the Advocacy Services and Representations Procedure (Children) (Amendment) Regulations 2004. Alongside these Regulations there is statutory guidance entitled Providing Effective Advocacy Services for Children and Young People Making a Complaint under the Children Act 1989.

4. Overview of the Children's Complaints Procedure

4.1 The statutory complaints procedure is a three-stage process. At stage 1 (also known as local resolution stage) complaints are investigated by the team where the complaint issue arose. In these cases, the team manager or service manager will usually investigate and respond to the complaint. The timescale for a stage 1 complaint response is 10 working days. However, where the complaint is complex or requires more time, an extension of up to a further 10 working days can be agreed by the Complaints Manager.

4.2 Where the complainant is dissatisfied with the stage 1 response, they can request a Stage 2 investigation. This stage requires an independent investigation, and two independent people are appointed by the Complaints Manager for the role of Independent Investigator and Independent Person. The investigation team produce reports which are passed to a senior officer within Children's Services for adjudication and response to the complainant at stage 2. The statutory timescale for this stage is 25 to 65 working days.

4.3 It is a statutory requirement to commission an Independent Person (IP) to oversee the integrity of a stage 2 investigation to ensure it remains child focused. It is good practice to appoint an IP who has not been employed by the council for a minimum of three years. Richmond commission external officers to undertake this role.

4.4 Stage 3 is the final stage of the complaint procedure. If a complainant remains unhappy following the findings of the stage 2 investigation, they can request that their

complaint is reviewed at Stage 3 by an independent panel. The panel hearing should take place within 30 working days of the request. The panel is made up of three people, all independent of the local authority; the complainant has an opportunity to present their case to the panel alongside the Local Authority. The Chair of the Panel communicates the panel decision to the complainant and the Executive Director of Children's Services within five working days of the panel hearing, and the Executive Director must respond to the complainant within a further 15 working days of the panel date.

4.5 A complaint is defined as '***an expression of dissatisfaction or disquiet in relation to an individual child or young person, which requires a response***.'

4.6 Complaints can be made by the young person receiving a direct service from Children's Social Care or by a person on their behalf such as an advocate or family member where the service user has provided their written consent if they are Fraser competent[1].

4.7 Where a service is provided by a contractor on behalf of Achieving for Children, a complaint can either be made directly to the provider service or to the Complaints team at Richmond Council. Whilst the complaints team will encourage a provider service to firstly attempt resolution through its own procedures, if this is not possible, the Quality Assurance and Contract Monitoring team will investigate.

4.8 Complaints will be considered if they are made within 12 months of the incident although Achieving for Children can apply their discretion to waive this time limit in some instances.

4.9 The Complaints Team have the discretion to put on hold a complaint (or certain aspects of a complaint), if there is a concurrent legal process addressing the same issues. Once the concurrent process is complete, the complainant has 12 months to request that their complaint is re-opened.

4.10 Complaints are counted in the year in which they were responded to or closed: 2025-26 complaint figures include complaints that will have been initiated in the previous year (2024-25) but then closed in this reporting year.

4.11 Achieving for Children commissions its advocacy provision through 'Coram Voice' to assist children and young people when making a complaint or a representation. This year the Complaints Manager has contributed to the quarterly contract monitoring meetings led by our Children's Commissioning Team.

[1] Fraser competent is a term used to describe a child under 16 who is considered to be of sufficient age and understanding to fully appreciate what is involved in their treatment.

5. Learning from complaints/Quality Assurance

5.1 Getting the Best from Complaints (5.7.1) requires Local Authorities to monitor the operation and effectiveness of their complaints procedures with quality assurance systems that feed complaint outcomes into operational delivery.

5.2 Achieving for Children is a learning organisation and recognises that complaints are valuable as they provide an opportunity to improve services for the individual and improve practice to prevent the same mistakes from happening. Outcomes, particularly from stage 2 and 3 statutory complaints are shared at the Performance, Quality and Innovation Board. This is a forum where practitioners and managers across social care, education and SEND services can reflect on the learning from complaints to improve their own practice and their team's performance.

5.3 Achieving for Children also highlights learning from complaints – Achieving for Children carry out seven-minute briefings which are concise learning sessions designed to enhance knowledge and improve practice. Notably, improving case recording and awareness of the Parent and Carer Needs Assessments process has been the subject of these target sessions.

5.4 This year learning highlighted the importance of clear, timely and consistent communication with children, young people, parents and carers. Several complaints identified the need for families to be kept updated, involved in planning and informed when decisions are made, particularly where services are unable to agree to requests.

5.5 The learning also reinforced the importance of accurate recording, clear assessment practice and strong management oversight. This included ensuring that parents' views are reflected, factual errors are corrected promptly, actions from meetings are followed through, and key work such as Life Story Books, Later in Life Letters and care planning is tracked.

5.6 A further theme was the need to strengthen partnership working and inclusive practice. Learning included improving transitions between services, working more effectively with fathers and wider family members, supporting families with neurodiversity or disability-related needs, and ensuring commissioned placements and support arrangements are clear, safe and well managed.

5.7 Learning case studies are provided throughout the report.

Case Study Stage 1: Improving transition to adult services for care leavers

Background

The complainant, a care leaver, raised concerns about their transition from a Staying Put arrangement, alongside wider concerns about care planning, communication and continuity of support. Key concerns included uncertainty about future accommodation, limited involvement in planning, changes in allocated workers, and whether mental health, disability and trauma had been fully considered. The case involved a complex transition between Children's Services and Adult Social Care. Although planning had taken place over time, changes in circumstances meant alternative arrangements had to be developed quickly.

Outcome

The investigation found no fault in how the end of the Staying Put arrangement had been communicated, as records showed this had been discussed on several occasions. However, both services acknowledged the distress caused by the uncertainty and complexity of the transition. Children's Services and Adult Social Care accepted that, despite attempts to involve the complainant, they felt excluded and insufficiently supported. Both services apologised and accepted that communication about accommodation options and contingency planning could have been clearer.

Actions included progressing a housing application, exploring supported living options, and reviewing the care and support plan. Adult Social Care confirmed that ongoing support would continue and that future planning would reflect the complainant's needs and preferences.

Learning

This complaint has strengthened early joint working between Children's Services and Adult Social Care. Dual pathway planning will now ensure alternative options are considered earlier and reviewed regularly.

Services will discuss contingency planning earlier, including realistic housing options, timescales and service responsibilities, to reduce uncertainty and manage expectations.

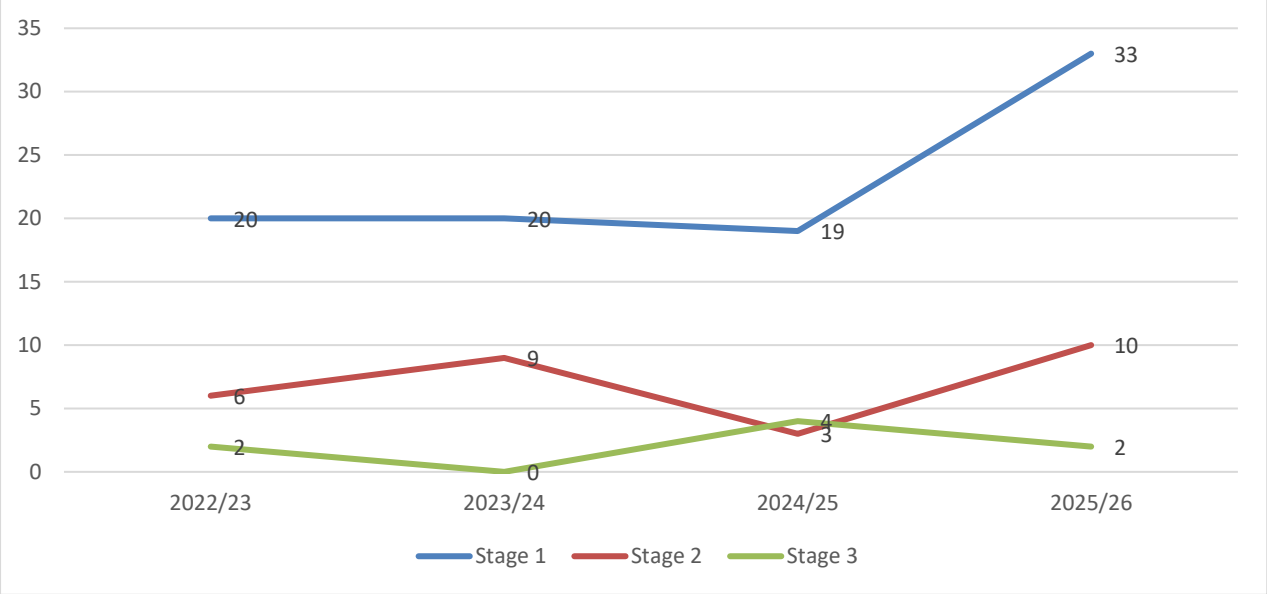
There will be a stronger focus on ensuring young people are meaningfully involved in decisions about their future, including improved participation in meetings and care planning. Communication and coordination between teams will continue to be strengthened, with clearer handovers where worker changes are unavoidable.

Learning from this complaint has been shared through team discussions and staff training to improve support for other young people moving between children's and adult services.

6. Statutory complaint numbers and representations

6.1 Achieving for Children and the Council welcome all feedback, including complaints and representations about its services. Service users, families and carers can provide their views in an open and transparent way and can easily access the complaints procedure.

Chart 1: Children's statutory complaints completed by year and stage 2022/23 to 2025/26



6.2 In 2025-26, Achieving for Children services completed 45 formal statutory complaints across all three complaint stages, which is a 73% increase on the 26 completed across all stages in 2024-25[2]. The breakdown of the 45 complaints across all three stages is detailed in **Chart 1** above and **Table 1** below.

Table 1: Children's statutory complaints received and completed by stage and year 2022/23 to 2025/26

Stage	2022/23 completed	2022/23 rec.	2023/24 completed	2023/24 rec.	2024/25 completed	2024/25 rec.	2025/26 completed	2025/26 rec.
S1	20	19	20	22	19	20	33	29
S2	6	7	9	6	3	5	10	6
S3	2	2	0	3	4	2	2	3
Total	28	28	29	31	26	27	45	38

[2] Four stage 1 complaints were carried over from the previous year. No stage 1 complaints received this year were carried over and closed in the next financial year. In total 29 new stage 1 complaints were received and 33 completed, though these are not the same complaints.

Table 2: Complaints completed by stage and quarterly reporting period: 2025-26

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
Stage 1	10	9	9	5	**33**
Stage 2	1	4	2	3	**10**
Stage 3	0	0	1	1	**2**
Total	**11**	**13**	**12**	**9**	**45**

6.2 The increase in statutory complaints from 26 to 45 across all three stages reflects a more complex set of factors than accessibility of the complaints process alone. While Achieving for Children continues to welcome complaints and representations as an important source of feedback and learning, the main drivers of the increase appear to relate to the complexity and pressure within children's social care during the year. In particular, the data shows a marked rise in placement-related complaints, which became the most common primary issue at Stage 1, increasing from three complaints in 2024-25 to 11 complaints in 2025-26. This indicates that placement availability, suitability, stability and transition arrangements were a significant factor in the increased volume of complaints.

6.3 This local picture reflects wider pressures in the children's placement market. National analysis has highlighted that children's social care sufficiency is affected by the availability, suitability and location of placements, workforce capacity, foster carer availability and local authorities competing for placements. It also notes that London has a distinct placement market, with very few children's homes and limited local placement options, particularly for some children with more complex needs. These wider market pressures can mean children are placed further from their home area when suitable provision is not available locally, which can increase the complexity of planning, communication and support for children, families and carers.

6.4 The complaint themes this year support this analysis. Placement issues, communication and lack of support were the most frequently raised primary issues at Stage 1, and the wider analysis of all issues raised across Stage 1 complaints shows that communication, lack of support, delays and placement concerns were recurring themes. There has also been an increase in the use of AI tools by complainants which are contributing to longer, more detailed and more structured complaints, which can increase the number of issues raised within individual complaints and the complexity of the response required. Taken together, the increase in complaints should therefore be understood as reflecting both increased complexity in the issues being raised and the wider pressures affecting placement sufficiency, rather than a deterioration in complaints handling or practice alone.

6.5 Finally, the rise in complaints across all stages may also indicate that more complex cases are being progressed through the full statutory process. This reflects

appropriate use of escalation routes where complainants remain dissatisfied, ensuring that independence and additional scrutiny are applied where necessary. This is an important safeguard within the statutory framework and demonstrates that the procedure is being used as intended.

6.6 The volume of formal complaints should also be set in context by looking at the overall level of contact and interaction Achieving for Children has with partners, residents, and service users. The 45 formal complaints completed this year is a low proportion, given that in 2025-26, the department handled 12,213 contacts from partners and agencies of which 1,649 resulted in social care referrals, 1,491 social care assessments were undertaken (in additional 1,103 review assessments were completed), and 808 new Section 47 (Child Protection) enquiries were concluded[3].

6.7 In addition to the 45 formal complaints, during the year the Statutory Complaints Team dealt with 138 enquiries over a wide range of representations or issues or concerns that did not fit within the remit the Statutory Complaints Process, or instances where the complainant disengaged at the initial stages of contact. Combined, this means that the team assessed, triaged and dealt with 183 matters, 45 of which were formal complaints.

6.8 Representations are low level complaint matters that have been resolved informally and quickly to prevent escalation to the formal complaints process. Issues or concerns are other matters that residents have sent directly to the Complaints Team for triaging, signposting, or redirecting to another team or process, for example, school complaints or safeguarding issues. These numbers are included in **Table 3** below to demonstrate the breadth of the work undertaken by the Complaints Team alongside the formal complaints completed through the statutory complaints process this year.

Table 3: Representations, issues or concerns handled by the Complaints Team in 2025-26

Type of case	Number
Formal Complaints completed through the Statutory complaints process	45
Corporate complaints for AfC (Education and SEND (triaged through Corporate Complaints Process)	39
Statutory complaint requests rejected (redirected) or no consent	16

[3] Last year there were 12,075 contacts from partners and agencies of which 1,511 resulted in social care referrals, 1,314 social care assessments were undertaken, and 753 new Section 47 (Child Protection) enquires were concluded.

Corporate complaints for social care (triaged through Corporate Complaints Process)	15
Representations: Low level complaints sent to services for quick resolution	15
Other	13 (includes 8 disengaged)
Complaints specifically about schools/early years provision (for school complaints process)	13
Enquiries passed to other services or directorates	11
Safeguarding issues	7
Issues for external partners/agencies	4
Data Protection/FOI requests/Right to Rectification, redirected to Information Governance Processes	4
Historical abuse	1
TOTAL number of cases handled by the complaints team this year (includes the 45 formal complaints)	183

7. Statutory Complaints by service area

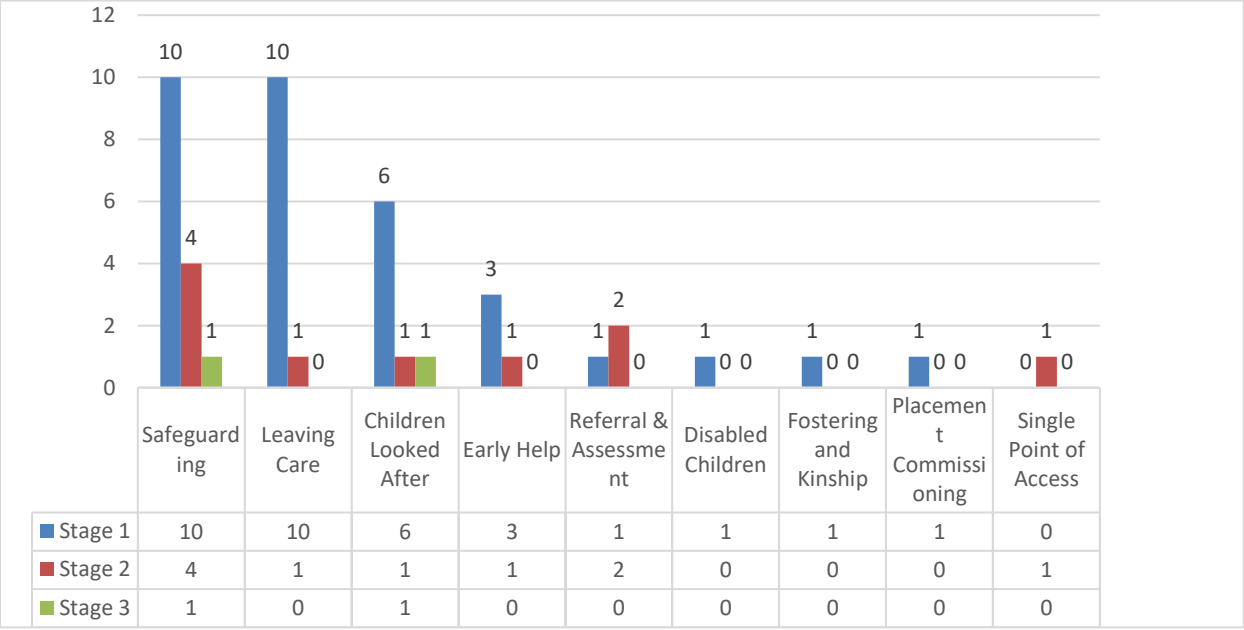
7.1 **Table 4** details the breakdown of complaints completed within the wider service area during the reporting year. Of the 33 Stage 1 complaints the majority were for the Leaving Care and Safeguarding teams.

7.2 Numbers and overall percentages of completed complaints across all three stages and services are set out in **Table 4** and **Chart 2** below.

Table 4: Statutory Complaints completed by lead Service, Stage and Quarter 2025/26

Stage 1[4]	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
Leaving Care	4	1	4	1	**10**
Safeguarding	1	4	3	2	**10**
Children Looked After	3	2	0	1	**6**
Early Help	1	1	0	1	**3**
Disabled Children's Service	0	0	1	0	**1**
Fostering and Kinship	0	1	0	0	**1**
Placement Commissioning	0	0	1	0	**1**
Referral and Assessment	1	0	0	0	**1**
Stage 2					
Safeguarding	0	3	0	1	**4**
Referral and Assessment	0	1	1	0	**2**
Early Help	0	0	0	1	**1**
Children Looked After	0	0	1	0	**1**
Leaving Care	0	0	0	1	**1**
Single Point of Access	1	0	0	0	**1**
Stage 3					
Children Looked After	0	0	0	1	**1**
Safeguarding	0	0	1	0	**1**
GRAND TOTAL					**33**

Chart 2: Statutory Complaints completed by lead service area across all stages 2025-26



[4] 1 complaint for Leaving Care was responded to jointly with adult social care, 1 complaint for Early Help was responded to jointly with Referral and Assessment (this also progressed to stage 2) and 1 complaint for Early Help was responded to jointly with SEND

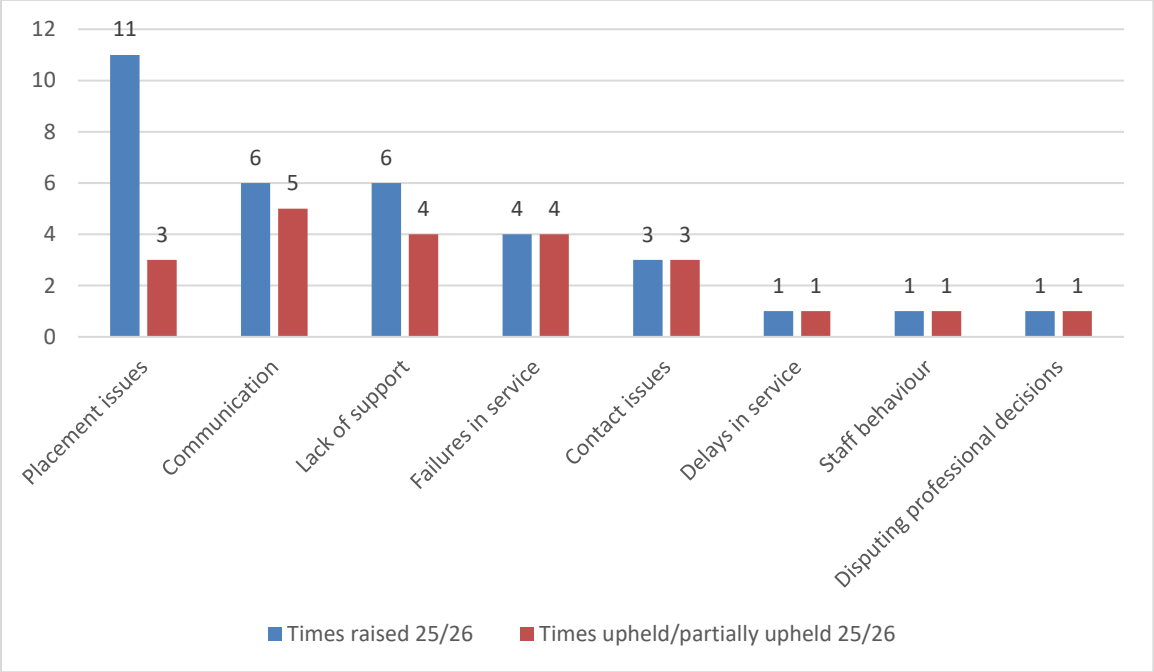
8. Statutory Complaints by Issues and outcomes: Stage 1

8.1 Complaint issues allow us to understand how services are perceived by young people and their families, and what can be learnt from complaints to improve service provision. Most complaints for Children's Social Care are complex and contain multiple issues. For the 33 stage 1 complaints, the primary theme and outcomes have been analysed initially we have also provided data on all of the issue raised from the 33 stage 1 complaints to demonstrate the breadth of concerns raised.

8.2 This year 11 stage 1 complaints were made by young people and 22 were made by parents/guardians.

8.3 **Chart 3** below demonstrates that Achieving for Children have partly upheld the majority of complaints. This reflects both the multi-issue nature of social care complaints and Achieving for Children's positive complaints culture, which recognises that most complaints present opportunities for learning.

Chart 3: Stage 1 complaints completed by Primary Issue and times upheld/partly upheld 2025-26



8.4 **Chart 3** also highlights the principal issues raised across the 33 stage 1 complaints last year, whilst **Chart 4** provides the principal issues of complaints from last year. A comparison of Stage 1 complaint issues over the past two years shows a notable shift in the primary concerns raised by complainants.

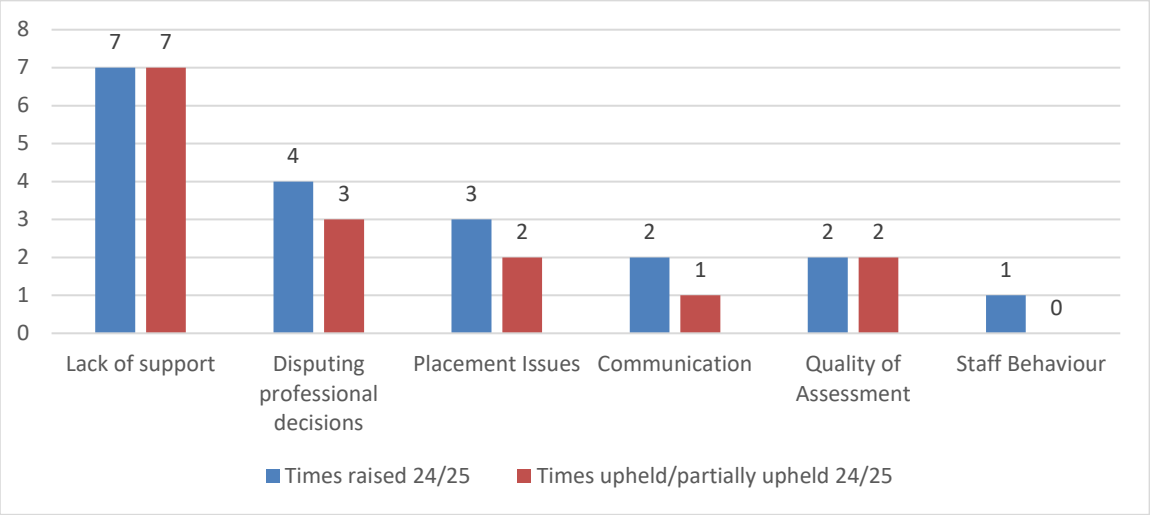
8.5 This year, placement issues emerged as the most frequent principal issue, raised in 11 complaints, representing a significant increase compared to three complaints in the previous year. In contrast, last year's most prominent issue was lack of support, which reduced from seven complaints to six this year, although it remains a key theme.

8.6 At Stage 1, analysis of complaint issues shows that placement-related concerns were the most frequently raised, accounting for 11 complaints, indicating a notable increase in challenges associated with placement stability, suitability and transitions. These complaints often reflected the complexity of meeting young people's needs, as well as the impact of placement changes on continuity of care and support. Six of these complaints were made directly by looked after children, which is a positive indicator of an open and transparent complaints culture within Achieving for Children. This demonstrates that young people feel able and supported to raise concerns about their care and experiences, and that the statutory complaints process is accessible to those it is intended to serve. Together, these trends highlight both the pressures within placement provision and the importance of maintaining a child-centred approach that actively encourages and responds to feedback from young people.

8.7 Similarly, disputes about professional decisions, which were one of the main drivers of complaints last year, have decreased considerably and were recorded as a primary issue in only one complaint this year. Communication has increased in prominence as a key area of concern, rising from two complaints last year to six this year, indicating a growing need for clear, timely and consistent engagement with families. In addition, failures in service delivery were raised in four complaints this year, having not featured as a primary issue in the previous year's data, suggesting increasing scrutiny of how services are implemented in practice.

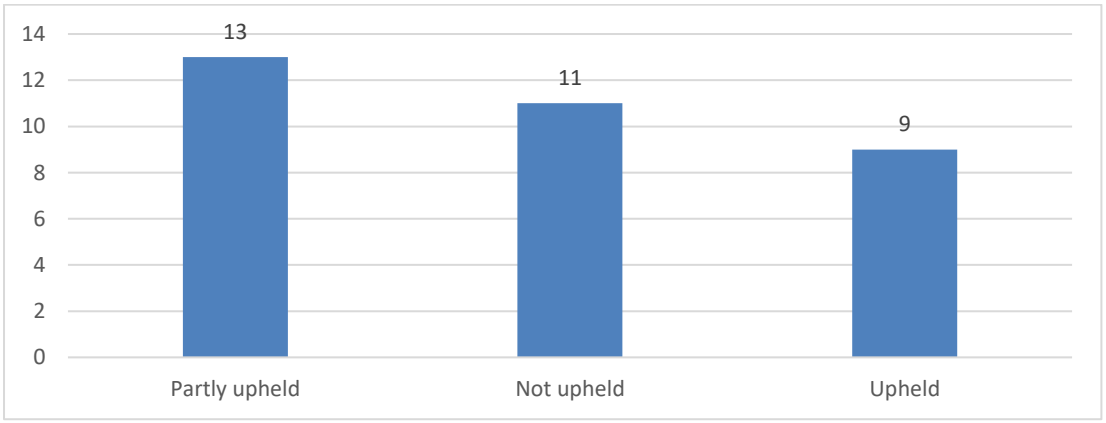
8.8 Overall, while some issues such as lack of support remain consistent, the shift towards placement pressures and communication-related concerns highlights changing pressures within Children's Services, particularly in relation to placement sufficiency and the importance of maintaining strong engagement with children, young people and their families.

Chart 4: Stage 1 complaints completed by Primary Issue and times upheld/partly upheld 2024-25



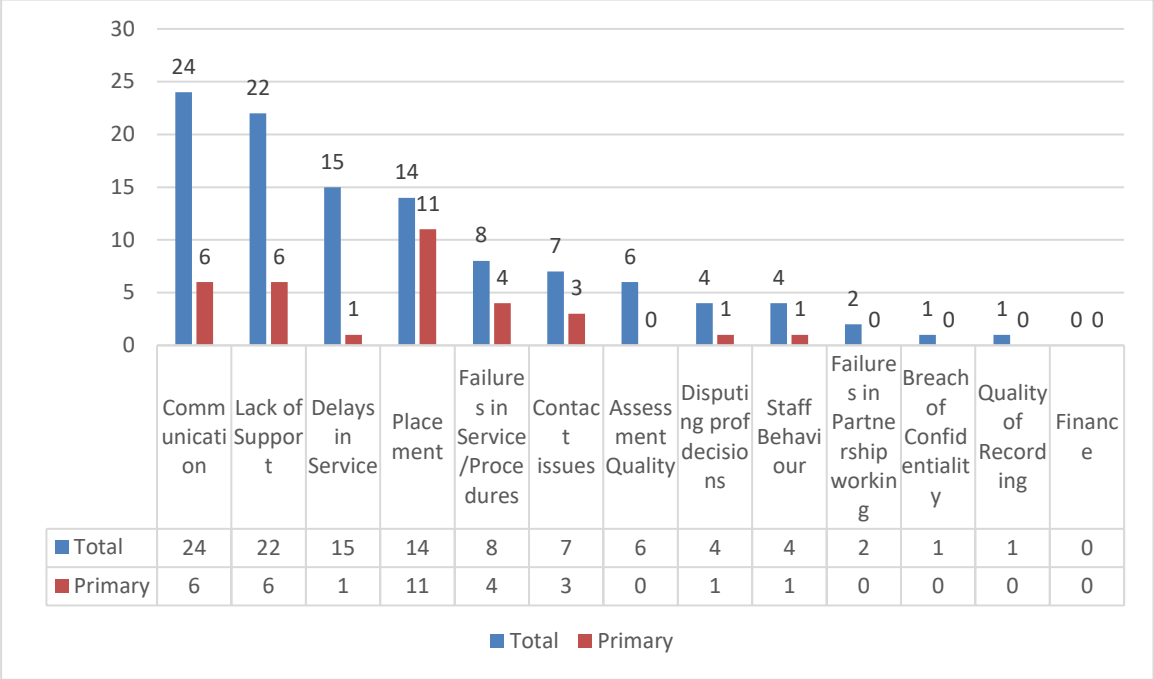
8.9 **Chart 5** supports this analysis by illustrating that most complaints (63%) were partly upheld. This indicates that whilst some mistakes were identified, not all the issues complained about were found to be substantiated.

Chart 5 – Stage 1 overall complaint outcomes 2025/26



8.10 Whilst **Chart 3** on page 12 outlines the primary issues for each stage 1 complaint, **Chart 6** below sets out each issue raised across the 33 stage 1 complaints. In total, 108 issues were identified, demonstrating the breadth and often the complexity of children's statutory complaints.

Chart 6: Full data on the issues raised from the 33 Stage 1 complaints 2025-26



	Communication	Lack of Support	Delays in Service	Placement	Failures in Service/Procedures	Contact issues	Assessment Quality	Disputing prof decisions	Staff Behaviour	Failures in Partnership working	Breach of Confidentiality	Quality of Recording	Finance
Total	24	22	15	14	8	7	6	4	4	2	1	1	0
Primary	6	6	1	11	4	3	0	1	1	0	0	0	0

Case Study (stage 1)

Background

This complaint related to a family's involvement with Early Help and subsequent progression to a Child in Need assessment. The complainant raised concerns that there had been delays in escalating the case from Early Help to Children's Social Care, which they felt delayed appropriate intervention and contributed to family distress. They also expressed dissatisfaction with how they were engaged throughout the process, reporting that they had not been contacted directly at key stages and felt excluded from decision-making. Further concerns included perceived miscommunication by professionals, disagreement with how information about their behaviour and mental health had been interpreted, and a lack of access to neurodiversity-affirming support. In addition, the complainant highlighted issues with complaint handling, including delays, lack of clarity, and a failure to progress a proposed meeting due to administrative error.

Outcome

It was acknowledged that the complainant had not been contacted at the referral stage, limiting their opportunity to contribute to early decision-making, and that communication could have been more inclusive, particularly in ensuring direct engagement with both parents. Concerns regarding the basis of the initial assessment were also partially upheld. Other aspects were not upheld, as there was no evidence that the Child in Need assessment was presented as anything other than voluntary, or that the assessment process failed to consider both parents' views. While the request for specialist neurodiversity-affirming support was recognised, the service was found to have acted within its remit**.**

Learning

The service has strengthened its approach to inclusive practice by ensuring that all individuals with parental responsibility are identified and contacted directly at the earliest opportunity. This has reduced reliance on one parent to share information and will ensure that all relevant perspectives are considered in decision-making. Staff will be supported to consistently apply this approach across Early Help and Social Care services.

The service has enhanced professional curiosity and balanced information gathering at the point of referral and assessment. Greater emphasis has been placed on verifying information from multiple sources, including direct engagement with all family members, to ensure that decisions are based on a complete and accurate understanding of family circumstances.

Knowledge and awareness of neurodiversity will be further developed across Children's Services. This will include increased collaboration with specialist organisations and partners to improve understanding of how neurodiversity may influence communication and engagement.

9. Statutory Complaints by key themes: Stage 2 and 3

9.1 This year 10 Stage 2 complaints were completed and seven were partially upheld, two were not upheld and one was fully upheld. Nine of these complaints were made by parents/guardians and only one by a young care leaver.

9.2 Key themes from these complaints highlighted opportunities to further strengthen communication, timeliness, and practice quality. While many decisions were appropriate, some families reported that communication and engagement could be improved, particularly in ensuring consistent involvement of all parents and clearer explanations of plans and next steps. Record keeping and information sharing were also identified as areas for development, with some cases reflecting incomplete or delayed records which impacted transparency.

9.3 Delays in progressing assessments, care planning and complaint responses remain an area for continued focus, including meeting statutory timescales. There were also examples where assessments could be strengthened further to fully reflect the complexity of need, particularly for neurodiverse families, and to ensure all relevant professionals and family perspectives are clearly captured.

9.4 Complaints also pointed to opportunities to improve access to tailored support and strengthen planning around placements and care arrangements. Overall, while decisions were often proportionate, improving communication, timeliness and consistency of practice will enhance the experience for families and support better outcomes

9.5 A review of Stage 2 complaints shows that, while safeguarding decisions were generally appropriate, learning has focused on improving consistency, communication and quality of practice across Children's Social Care. AfC will strengthen how it engages with families by ensuring all parents and carers are consistently involved in assessments and decision-making, with clearer communication about thresholds, plans and next steps. Practice will ensure that families better understand decisions and feel informed and supported throughout their involvement with services.

9.6 There will be a continued focus on improving the quality of recording, with clearer, more accurate and timely case records that fully evidence decision-making. This will support greater transparency and ensure that assessments reflect up-to-date and reliable information.

9.7 AfC will also improve timeliness in key areas of practice, including care planning and safeguarding activity, so that actions are progressed without unnecessary delay and children and families receive support at the right time.

9.8 Learning has also reinforced the need for high-quality, evidence-based assessments that reflect the complexity of need, including disability and neurodiversity. Practice will

ensure that all relevant information is considered, including contributions from families and partner agencies, to support robust and balanced decision-making.

9.9 Finally, AfC will strengthen its approach to placement planning and support for children with complex needs, ensuring that arrangements are well planned, clearly communicated and responsive, with appropriate support in place to promote stability and positive outcomes.

Case study (Stage 2): Strengthening Pathway Plan Oversight for Care Leavers

Summary

The complaint concerned accommodation planning and support for a care leaver, including the management of a proposed move, reliance on temporary accommodation, the suitability and location of placements, and the quality of longer-term accommodation. Concerns were also raised about failures to provide an up-to-date Pathway Plan.

Outcome

Four complaints were not upheld, relating to concerns that the initial move was poorly arranged, temporary accommodation was unsuitable and overused, an interim placement was unsafe and too distant, and the current accommodation did not meet expectations. The investigation found that, although the situation caused understandable distress, accommodation met statutory requirements and safeguarding responsibilities were maintained. One complaint was upheld, relating to the failure to update and share the care leaver's Pathway Plan in line with statutory requirements. While staff worked to maintain access to education, therapeutic support and key relationships, and kept accommodation under review in line with the young person's wishes, there was no evidence an updated plan had been provided. The service accepted fault, apologised, and offered a financial remedy to recognise the uncertainty caused

Learning

There is now clearer oversight and tracking of Pathway Plan reviews and sharing, improved assurance that statutory documents are completed and provided as required, and continued emphasis on transparent communication with young people and families when plans change unexpectedly. Learning from this complaint has been shared with relevant teams and governance forums to support continuous improvement and to strengthen practice around care leaver planning, record-keeping, and expectation management.

9.10 This year there were two Stage 3 panels completed. Both were partially upheld and were made by parents/guardians. While the circumstances of each case were different, both complaints raised concerns about the quality of support provided to children, the actions of professionals and external providers, and the overall management of complex and high-risk situations.

9.11 A consistent theme across both complaints was challenge to professional decision-making and the perceived quality of care, including whether children received appropriate support and whether decisions taken by practitioners were in their best interests.

9.12 A second key theme was concerns about the actions and oversight of commissioned services, particularly in relation to residential placements, adherence to professional guidance, and how risks were managed in practice.

9.13 Both cases also highlighted the importance of effective working relationships with families, with concerns raised about communication, engagement and the extent to which families felt their views had been understood and reflected in decision-making.

9.14 In one case, there were also specific concerns about gaps in information and uncertainty in practice, where incomplete or inconsistent records meant that not all aspects of events could be clearly established.

9.15 The cases have reinforced the importance of strong oversight and quality assurance of commissioned placements. As a result, there will be a continued focus on ensuring that providers consistently deliver care in line with agreed plans and professional guidance, with clear expectations and accountability supporting improved outcomes for children and young people.

9.16 They have also highlighted the importance of high-quality, comprehensive record keeping. Strengthening recording practices across both internal teams and external providers will support clearer decision-making, improve transparency, and ensure that there is a robust evidence base underpinning practice.

9.17 The complaints have further supported ongoing work to embed strong risk management and safeguarding practice, particularly in complex situations. This includes maintaining a clear focus on understanding and responding to risk, ensuring that actions are timely, well-coordinated, and centred on the needs and safety of children.

Case study (Stage 3): Driving Improvement in Placement Practice and Safeguarding Responses

Summary

A complaint was received regarding the suitability of a care placement and the actions of placement staff in the period leading up to a young person going missing from care. Concerns were raised about whether appropriate decisions had been made by the placement provider, including actions taken that were not in line with professional guidance. The complaint also highlighted that gaps in both local authority and provider records meant that not all aspects of events could be clearly established.

Outcome

The Stage 3 Review Panel did not uphold concerns regarding the suitability of the placement but partially upheld elements of the complaint in relation to the actions of the placement provider. It identified that some decisions taken by staff were inappropriate and not proportionate. The Panel also found that incomplete and inconsistent record keeping across agencies meant that it was not possible to reach a clear conclusion on all aspects of the complaint. As a result, a number of actions were agreed, including a formal review of the missing from care episode and further consideration of the provider's practice through regulatory and safeguarding processes.

Learning

This complaint will strengthen the council's approach to oversight and quality assurance of commissioned placements, ensuring that providers consistently deliver care in line with agreed plans and professional guidance. Recording practices will be improved across both internal teams and external providers to ensure that there is a clear, accurate and complete account of key events and decisions. The service will also build on its safeguarding practice by ensuring that responses to children who go missing from care are consistently robust, with timely actions, clear risk management, and evidence of follow-up activity. Learning from this case will continue to be embedded through service review and governance processes to support high-quality, child-centred practice.

10. Response times

10.1 This year 33 stage 1 complaints were completed. 67% (or 22) of Stage 1 complaints received a response on time which is shown on **Chart 7.** This is a significant improvement on the 42% responded to on time in 2024-25.

Chart 7: Percentage of stage 1 complaints on time 2025-26

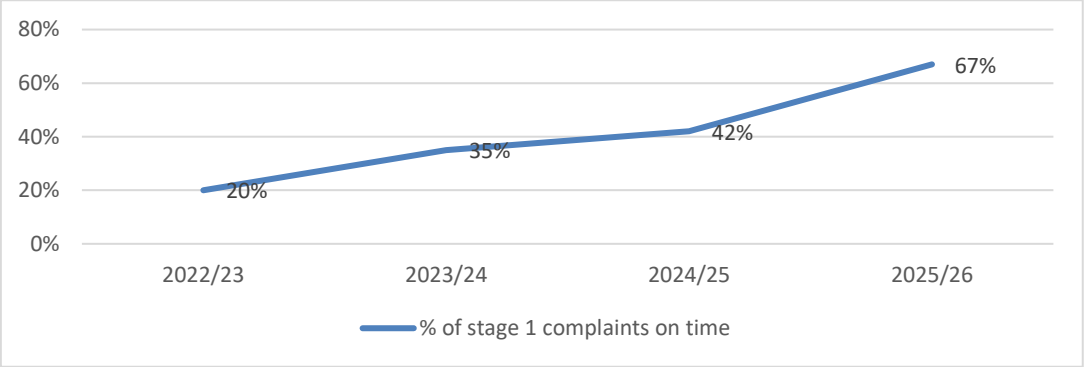
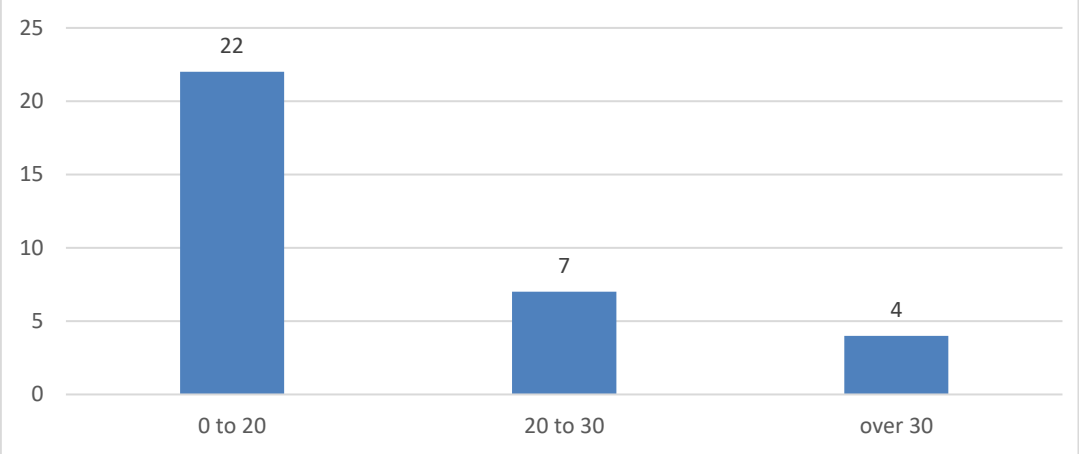


Chart 8: Stage 1 response times completed complaints 2025/26



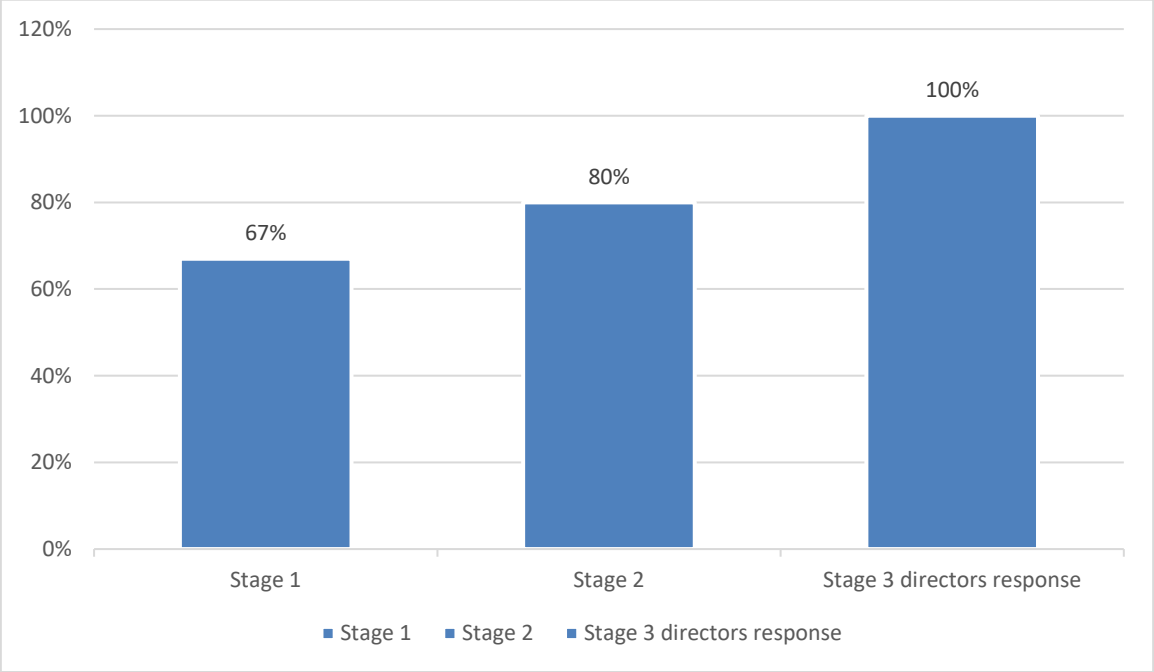
10.2 'On time' means complaints that received a response within 20 working days. Stage 1 complaints should be investigated and completed within a timescale of 10 working days. This can be extended up to 20 working days for more complex complaints or in other instances where an extension is agreed by the Complaints Manager. Where complaints are delayed, the complaints team always ensure that complainants are advised of extensions to deadlines and kept informed about the progress of their complaint.

10.3 Stage 2 complaints have a statutory timescale of 25 to 65 working days. This year, 10 stage 2 complaints were completed. Of these, eight were completed within the 65 working day timescale. The average time to complete stage 2 investigations was 51 days. Five Stage 2 complaints are open at year end and will be closed in 2026-27.

10.4 Stage 3 panels must be held within 30 working days of the request and the panel report sent to the complainant within five working days of the panel. The Director's response to the panel's findings should be sent no later than 15 working days after the panel report is received. For each of the two stage 3 complaints completed in 2025-26, the Director's report was sent out within the 15 working day timescale.

10.5 It continues to be a challenge to hold Stage 3 panels within the prescribed 30-day timescale. Neither of the two Stage 3 panel could be arranged within 30 days. This is due to the availability of independent panel members and, at times, the complainants.

Chart 9: Percentage of complaints on time at all stages



11. Complaints from young people

11.1 The Complaints Team are always keen to receive complaints from children and young people directly as the statutory complaints process is in place for them. If it is considered that a complaint is best made from a child or young person, and they are Fraser competent, we aim to work directly with them alongside advocacy support.

11.2 This year the Complaints Team have received 11 complaints directly from young people at Stage 1 compared to four in the previous year. This increase represents a third of complaints and reflects Ofsted's recognition of the strong role that children in care and care leavers play in shaping services at Achieving for Children (July 2025 inspection). Inspectors found that young people are listened to, have opportunities to influence service development through participation forums such as the Children in Care Council, and actively shape the support they receive. This was reflected in the Outstanding judgement awarded for the experiences and progress of care leavers.

Case study (Stage 2) Strengthening Recording Practice and Complaint Handling in Children's Social Care

Summary

The complaint related to Achieving for Children's handling of a social work assessment. Concerns were raised about the accuracy, tone and evidential basis of recorded information, particularly in relation to parenting capacity and perceived risks. Some elements of the complaint were upheld or partially upheld where records were found to be inaccurate, insufficiently evidenced or not updated to reflect changing circumstances. Other concerns, including allegations of potential harm and deliberate non-disclosure, were not upheld. The complaint also identified delays in complaints handling, as earlier correspondence was not progressed through Stage 1, resulting in avoidable delay and an apology from the Local Authority.

Outcome

The investigation found that while the assessment itself was completed within statutory timescales, there were shortcomings in recording practice and complaints handling. Some professional statements were not proportionately framed or supported by robust evidence, and historic concerns remained on file despite evidence that risks had reduced. In addition, complaint correspondence was not consistently recognised or escalated, leading to delays and increased frustration for the complainant. These issues were acknowledged, and appropriate remedies were provided, including formal recognition of the delay in complaint progression. The complaint highlighted the need for consistently accurate, evidence-based and proportionate recording, particularly where assessments include risk-related information.

Learning

Records are now regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they reflect current circumstances and do not rely on outdated concerns. Language used in assessments will aim to be clear, balanced and respectful, to support constructive engagement with families. Strengthened management oversight has ensured that recording is scrutinised for accuracy and proportionality, and that resolved risks are clearly documented. In addition, staff have been reminded of their responsibility to identify and escalate complaints promptly, ensuring compliance with complaints handling requirements and reducing avoidable delays in responding to service users.

12. Young people: equalities data

12.1 The following section reviews the breakdown of the 45 statutory complaints completed at all stages by the category of support that the young people have received. The section will then go onto review the breakdown of equalities data of these young people.

12.2 At stage 1, this year the 33 complaints relate to 49 children or young people:

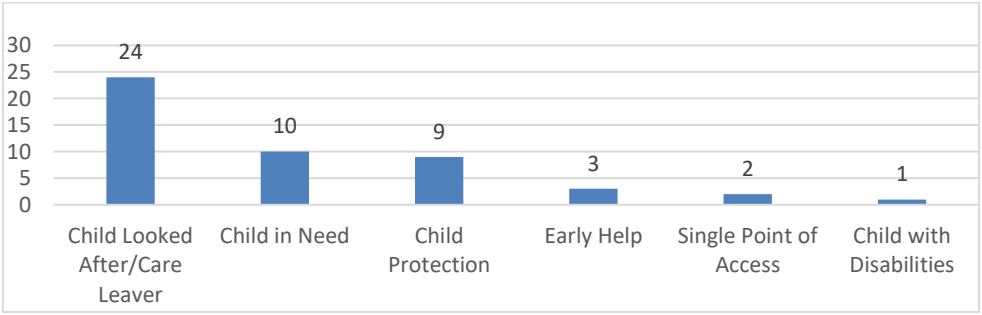
- 49% (or 24) of children and young people supported as Looked After Children and Care Leavers
- Child in Need accounted for 20% (or 10) of children and young people
- Child Protection accounted for 18% (or 9) of children and young people
- Early Help accounted for 6% (or 3) of children and young people
- Child with Disabilities accounted for 2% (or 1) children and young people
- 4% (or 2) of children and young people were known to Single Point of Access

12.3 At Stage 2, this year the 10 complaints relate to 13 children or young people:

- 46% (or 6) of children and young people supported as Looked After Children and Care Leavers
- Child in Need accounted for 23% (or 3) of children and young people
- With the remaining four (30%) about children known to Early Help and Single Point of Access.

12.4 At Stage 3, this year the 2 complaints relate to 2 children or young people one was a Looked After Child the other was subject to Child Protection.

Chart 10: Children and Young People across all complaints by category of support for 2025/26



12.5 Most complaints concerned children aged 10-15 years of age (19 children), followed by 0-9 years old (15 children). 11 complaints concerned young people in the 18-25 category were completed. Complaints concerning children in the 16-17 age range accounted for four young people.

12.6 The subject of the majority of complaints related to females (28) compared to young males (20) who were subject of a complaint. Additionally, one young person was noted as indeterminate.

12.7 **Charts 11, 12 and 13** below provide equalities data concerning the age, ethnicity and religion of young people that were the subject of a complaint this year[5] .

Chart 11: Age range of young people subject of a complaint 2025/26

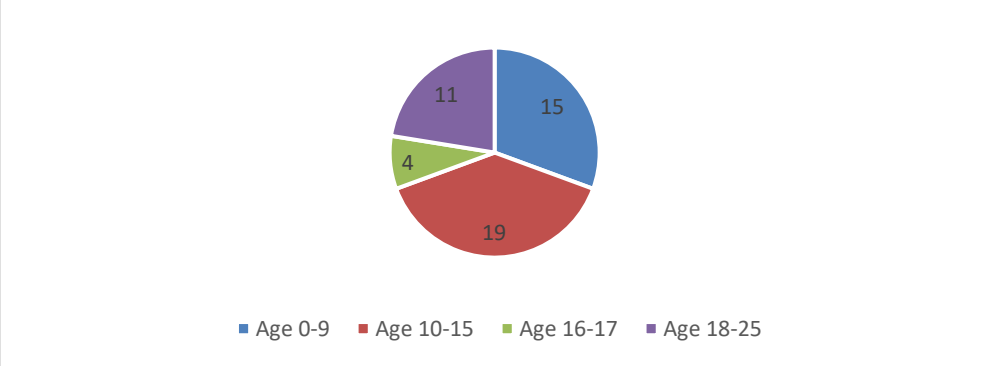
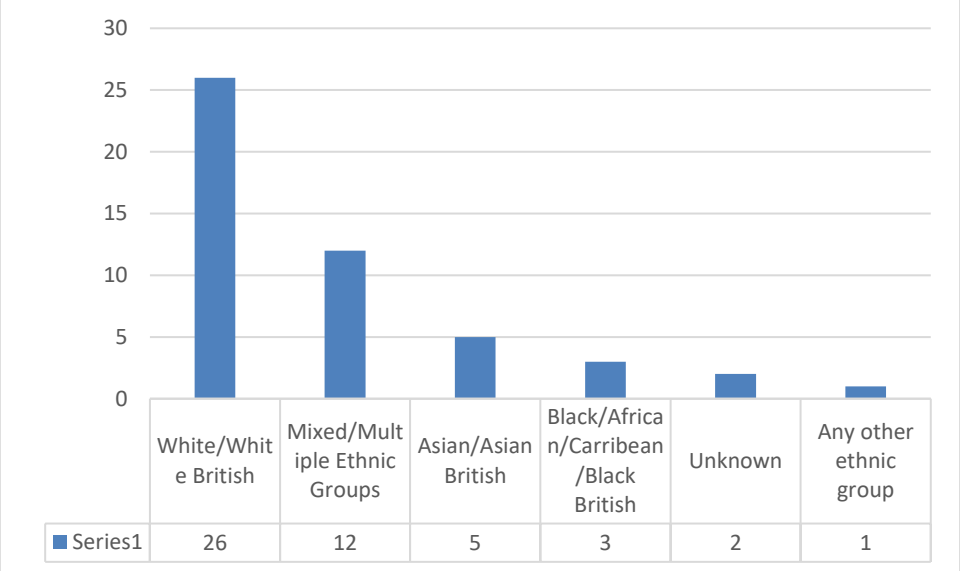
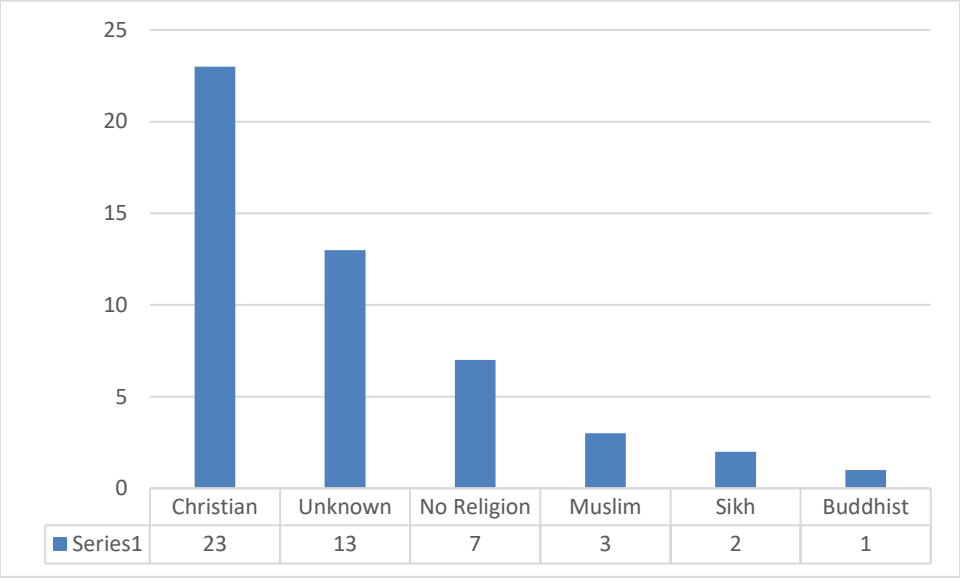


Chart 12: Ethnicity of young people that were the subject of a complaint 2025/26



[5] The number of young people that are the subject of a complaint this year is 49. This is higher than the 45 complaints at all stage, because some complaints concerned multiple siblings within one family.

Chart 13: Religion of young people that were the subject of a complaint 2025/26



12.8 The volume of these complaints should be taken in the context of the overall level of interaction as 124 new Child Protection plans started in the year (compared to 173 last year), the department supported 171 Looked after Children (164 last year) throughout the year (117 at 31 March 2026), 50 of whom started care during the year. There were also 688 children on a Child in Need Plan throughout the year, with 259 open at 31 March 2025 (491 throughout last year with 225 at 31 March 2024).

13. Corporate complaints

13.1 This report provides a brief overview of corporate complaints closed by Achieving for Children. Detailed reporting on corporate complaints is within Richmond council's Corporate Complaints Report 2025-26.

13.2 This year Achieving for Children completed 63 Stage 1 corporate complaints, which is a 15% increase on the 55 stage 1 corporate complaints last year. 36 escalated to Stage 2 which a 64% increase on the 22 Stage 2 complaints last year. SEND accounted for 50 of the 64 stage 1 corporate complaints.

13.3 With regards to timescales:

- 56 (89%) of the 63 Stage 1 corporate complaints were on time compared to 47 (85%) of the 47 complaints last year.
- 28 (78%) of the 36 stage 2 corporate complaints were on time compared to 19 (86%) of the 22 stage 2 last year.

13.4 Learning from Education and SEND stage 2 corporate complaints this year is summarised as follows:

- Strengthened communication with parents, carers, schools and partner agencies, with a focus on providing timely, clear and consistent information and managing expectations.
- Improved compliance with statutory SEND processes and timescales, particularly in relation to Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), annual reviews and consultations.
- Enhanced case management arrangements, including better handovers, record keeping, follow-up processes and tracking of actions to reduce delays and prevent escalation.
- Increased staff training and reflective learning on areas such as commissioning processes, Section 19 and Section 42 duties, complaints handling and SEND practice requirements.
- Strengthened partnership working with schools, health professionals and other agencies to support timely information sharing and early resolution of issues affecting children and young people.
- Improved engagement with families by ensuring parental views are considered, documented and reflected in decision-making and planning processes.
- Reinforcing the importance of proactive action and early intervention to identify and address gaps in provision before concerns escalate into formal complaints.

13.5 Learning from corporate complaints in Children's Services highlighted the importance of clear communication, timely information sharing, and effective engagement with children and families. Actions taken included reinforcing the need to complete Early Help assessments, ensuring staff clearly explain their roles and processes to families, sharing assessments promptly, and maintaining consistent communication with all parents who hold parental responsibility.

13.6 Learning also emphasised the importance of responding appropriately when families raise concerns or request contact with managers, and ensuring external providers working with young people have the relevant skills and experience to support them effectively. These improvements are intended to strengthen family engagement, increase transparency, and support better outcomes for children and young people.

14. Ombudsman Cases

14.1 This report provides a brief overview of Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) cases closed by Children's Services. Detailed reporting on Corporate and Ombudsman Complaints is within Richmond Council's Annual Corporate Complaints Report 2025-26.

14.2 A complainant has the right to refer their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) at any time. Generally, the Ombudsman will seek to ensure that the Local Authority/Achieving for Children, has been provided with the opportunity to first respond to the complaint in accordance with the Council's own statutory complaints process.

14.3 During 2025-26 eight Ombudsman enquiries and/or investigations were completed and by the LGSCO for Achieving for Children. This is 50% lower than the 16 in 2024/25. Only three of the eight complaints progressed to a formal investigation by the Ombudsman following assessment. All were for SEND. The LGSCO decided an additional seven enquiries regarding Achieving for Children but they were not passed to the Council as they were deemed by the Ombudsman to be either incomplete or invalid.

14.5 Of the eight complaints decided by the LGSCO in 2025-26, five were for SEND and three were for Social Care. The Ombudsman decisions are set out in **Table 5** below.

Table 5: LGSCO cases:

	Service	Complaint Subject	LGSCO decision
25022231	SEND	The Council failed to attend an Education Health and Care Plan (EHC Plan) review and the decision notice which followed had errors on it.	We will not investigate the complaint about an Education Health and Care Plan annual review. It is reasonable to expect them to appeal the outcome. And the faults alleged are not significant enough or cause a significant enough injustice to warrant an investigation.
25002750	SEND	The Council failed to provide special educational and alternative provision to their son.	Fault in the handling of elements of a child's special educational needs provision, including delays in responding to requests for reassessment, delays in reviewing educational suitability when attendance reduced, and failures to secure some provision specified in the EHC plan. AfC apologised and agreed to pay £400 to recognise the

			frustration and uncertainty caused.
25007078	SEND	Failed to make alternative educational provision when son could not go to school, and failed to make sure that it made the provision set out in his Education Health and Care (EHC) Plan. Took too long to commission a clinical psychologist's assessment and did not properly consider the recommendations they made.	Fault in the handling of a child's special educational needs provision and its consideration of alternative education while the child was unable to attend school. Found the child missed provision set out in their EHC Plan and that the AfC did not act quickly enough to review whether alternative provision was required. AfC agreed to apologise and pay £6,805.89, including reimbursement of online school costs and a payment to recognise the impact of missed provision and the injustice caused to the family.
25007702	SEND	Failed to provide education when a child could not attend due to sensory needs.	There is insufficient evidence of fault and elements of the complaint fall outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction
25012897	Social Care (adoption)	Concerns about the legality and ethics of an adoption.	The matters had already been considered as part of court proceedings so were outside of the Ombudsman's jurisdiction.
25013831	SEND	Handling of an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan review and failed to provide speech and language therapy (SLT) and occupational therapy.	LGSCO investigation found that injustice remedied during organisations complaint process.
25016706	Social Care (Complaints Team)	Delay in Statutory complaints procedure.	Not investigated as insufficient evidence of fault to justify an investigation.
25016794	Social Care (adoption)	failed to notify them about a court hearing concerning the adoption of his child.	Not investigated as issues relate to matters that were part of court proceedings.

15. Compliments

15.1 Positive feedback regarding staff or service delivery is another way in which the department can learn how well things are going. Compliments remind us of the excellent practice within services and reinforce that the promises made to learn from complaints are sincere. Staff are reminded to report compliments they receive so we can record as much positive feedback as possible to evidence the commitment to good social care practice.

15.2 Examples of compliments received from both service users and partner organisations are outlined below:

- "I am reaching out to you, as I would love to let you know how appreciative I am of your colleagues [name], who has worked closely with my family within our assessment period. They worked with diligence, incredible care and made myself, and my children feel safe and heard."

- "Regarding your assessment, truly outstanding job, which I am considering to share with boys individually as soon as I deem them as grown up enough to make sense of the assessment. I did not find any factual correction to be made. It was great meeting you and we appreciate your support."

- "Your support means so much to me you will never know how reading that just made me feel finally someone understanding the real world. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for not only believing in me but also now further helping me and recognising my ongoing efforts."

- "Throughout the process, she was open and honest about every step that was taking place. She also advised that we would benefit from having a disability social worker, which will help me greatly moving forward. She has now put everything in place for us, which has taken a huge weight off my shoulders. Knowing that my son will receive the right support and the appropriate equipment he needs has made a significant difference to our family. I would like to thank her for her professionalism, compassion, and support during what has been a very difficult time."

- "[name] is the nicest man. He normalised ADHD. He Nailed knowing her child within 5 minutes. He was so useful. He was great with kids. She can't thank him enough."

- "Mum shared they have been really responsive, understood the family's challenges and has nothing but positive things to say. Mum feels that if they had not come on board when she did, she does not feel she would have had such a positive experience. Mum hopes that they continues working as a social worker as people like her are needed."

- "She maintained a professional and transparent approach throughout, ensuring communication was clear and that decisions, expectations, and next steps were carefully explained. Her manner helped make the process easier to navigate and reduced anxiety for both myself and the children. She also established a positive relationship with the children, who felt comfortable speaking with her and engaged openly during their meetings. Since the assessment concluded, they have continued to ask when they might see her again, which reflects the trust she was able to build with them."

16. Key achievements in 2025/26

16.1 During 2025/26, the Complaints Service has continued to strengthen its role as a central corporate function, providing strategic oversight of both statutory and corporate complaints. We have maintained a clear focus on statutory compliance while using complaints insight to drive service improvement, strengthen governance, and provide assurance to senior leadership and external regulators.

16.2 A key achievement this year has been the further development of the Council's approach to statutory complaints, ensuring processes remain compliant, proportionate and responsive to the complexity of adult and children's social care cases. We have provided oversight and guidance on complex and high-risk complaints, supported multi-agency coordination, and ensured that investigation outcomes are robust, evidenced and aligned with statutory requirements.

16.3 We have also strengthened our approach to learning from statutory complaints, ensuring that themes arising from investigations are translated into meaningful service improvements. Through detailed case studies and engagement with practice leads, this has supported improvements in communication, transition planning, partnership working and decision-making, reinforcing the value of complaints as a driver for improvement, particularly in complex and sensitive cases.

16.4 A significant achievement this year has been our role in supporting housing services during a period of heightened regulatory scrutiny and a significant rise in complaint volumes. Acting as the Council's central point of contact and link officers with the Ombudsman, we have led on liaison with the Ombudsman, coordinated responses to enquiries and investigations, and ensured that submissions are clear, robust and compliant with the Complaint Handling Code.

16.5 This has included supporting the Council's response to Section 49 investigations and wider regulatory requirements, working closely with Housing and senior leadership to strengthen governance, improve oversight and embed more consistent complaint handling practices. We have provided direction and constructive challenge, supporting housing services to respond effectively to complex and high-profile complaints in line with regulatory expectations.

16.6 We have also provided targeted support during periods of acute operational pressure, including in relation to fire-related incidents and other sensitive cases. This has ensured that complaint handling approaches are appropriate to the circumstances, that responses were coordinated across services, and that communication with residents remained clear, proportionate and empathetic.

16.7 Alongside this, we have continued to build organisational capability across both statutory and corporate complaints through training, guidance and ongoing engagement with services. This has strengthened the quality and consistency of responses, with a particular focus on clarity, empathy and transparency in complex cases.

16.8 We have also enhanced our governance and assurance role, improving oversight of complaint handling across the organisation. This has included supporting improved data quality and strengthening reporting processes to provide a reliable picture of performance, risk and learning.

16.9 Finally, the Complaints Service has supported improved partnership working, particularly where complaints span multiple services or external organisations. By coordinating responses and supporting escalation where required, the service has ensured that complex complaints are managed effectively and outcomes remain fair and resident-focused.

16.10 Overall, the work undertaken during 2025/26 reflects the continued development of the Complaints Service as both a statutory function and a strategic enabler of improvement. Through its leadership on complex complaints, regulatory compliance, and organisational learning, the service has supported both councils to deliver more consistent, transparent and resident-focused services in an increasingly demanding regulatory environment.