



DARLINGTON

Borough Council

Children's Social Care Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Report 2024/25

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Introduction

1. Darlington Children's Social Care welcomes complaints, compliments and comments as a way of improving service delivery to children, young people and their families. The purpose of this report is to inform the service users, carers, the public, Council Members and Children's Social Care staff of the effectiveness of the Children's Social Care Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure (the Procedure). The report identifies topics and trends in relation to complaints information, makes suggestions for service improvements, where appropriate and identifies areas of organisational learning that have taken place in relation to people, policy and process.

The Law

2. The Council is required by law to have management arrangements in place for considering children's social care representations, including complaints, under the Children Act 1989. National legislative procedures for social care were amended in September 2006 with the introduction of the Children Act 1989 Representation Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 (the Regulations). It is a requirement of the Regulations that the Council publishes an annual report. In addition to the Regulations the Department for Education and Skills produced some comprehensive guidance for local authorities on managing complaints, called 'Getting the Best from Complaints'.
3. Key features of the Regulations include:
 - (a) A requirement for local authorities to appoint a Complaints Manager;
 - (b) A requirement for review panels to be retained by local authorities but with more robust arrangements for constituting and running them; and
 - (c) A 12 month time limit to make complaints.

Complaints and Information Governance Team

4. The Complaints and Information Governance Manager is appointed as the 'Complaints Manager' in accordance with the requirements of the Regulations. The Complaints and Information Governance (CIG) Team is independent of Children's Social Care operational line management. This ensures a high level of independence in the way children's social care complaints are managed within the Council.

Public Information

5. We are committed to making sure that everyone has equal access to all our services, including the Procedure. To help make the Procedure easily accessible we have produced two leaflets (one for children and young people and one for adults) covering all Council services to reflect the single point of access for complainants within the Council. The leaflets are available in all Council buildings. They have been written in line with the Plain English Campaign standards. The title is written in the most commonly used community languages and it contains details on how to access the information in other formats, for example, large print, audio and Braille.

6. Information is available on the Council's website. There is also an electronic form which people can use to make a complaint, pay someone a compliment or pass comment on Council services. People may make a complaint in any format they wish.
7. This can be in writing, by email, via the web, over the phone, in person or by any other reasonable means.
8. The Complaints Manager can arrange advocates and interpreters (including British Sign Language interpreters) where appropriate.

Children's Services Social Care Complaints Process

Stage 1 – Local Resolution

9. This initial stage allows children's social care managers the opportunity to try and resolve complaints locally, usually within the team being complained about.

Stage 2 – Investigation

10. Stage 2 involves a full and formal investigation. An 'Independent Person' must also be appointed to oversee the investigation and report independently to Children's Social Care Services. Both the Investigating Officer and Independent Person produce reports, which are submitted to a senior manager who writes the final response to the complainant.

Stage 3 – Review Panel

11. A review panel is convened when the complainant is dissatisfied with the Stage 2 response. The panel consists of an independent chairperson and two individuals who are independent of the Council.

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

12. Although complainants can refer complaints at any stage to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) they will not normally investigate until the Council has conducted its own investigation and provided a response.

External Support to the Complaints Process

Advocacy

13. The Council commissions an advocacy service for children and young people who make a complaint. This is an independent service provided by NYAS.

Investigating Officers

14. While the Regulations do not require investigating officers to be independent of the Council, we have signed up to a contract for the provision of independent investigating officers.

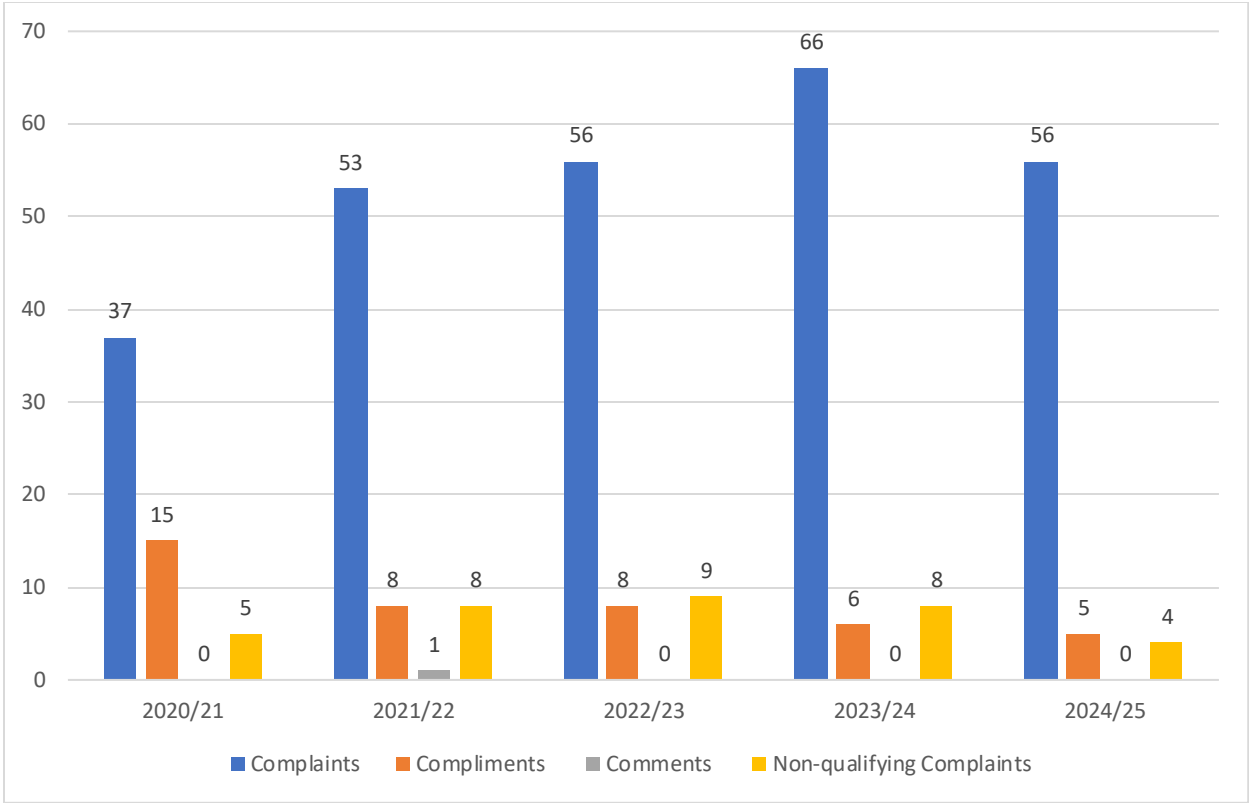
Independent Persons

15. The Council has signed up to a contract for the provision of independent persons.

Review Panels

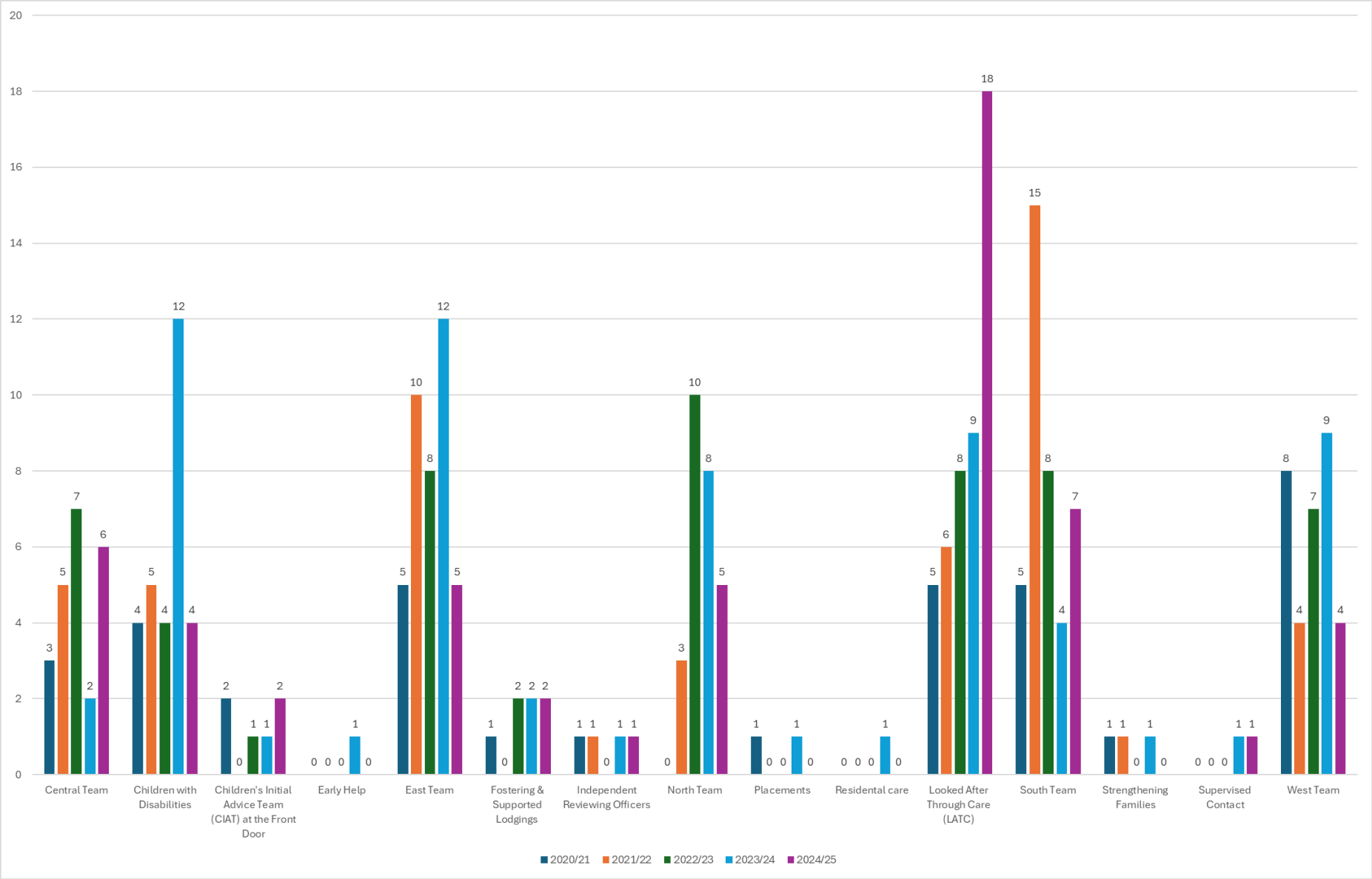
16. The Council has also signed up to a contract for the provision of an independent chair and independent panellist service.

Total Complaints, Compliments and Comments received



- 17. The Council saw a significant decrease in the number of complaints received, 56 compared to 66 in 2023/34. While 55 were investigated at stage 1, one was escalated directly to stage 2. This was the same number of complaints that were received in 2022/23.
- 18. The Council received five compliments, a decrease from six in 2023/24.
- 19. The Council did not receive any comments in 2024/25, 2023/24 or 2022/23.
- 20. The Council received four non-qualifying complaints, a decrease from eight in 2023/24.

Breakdown of Stage 1 Complaints by Service Area/Team

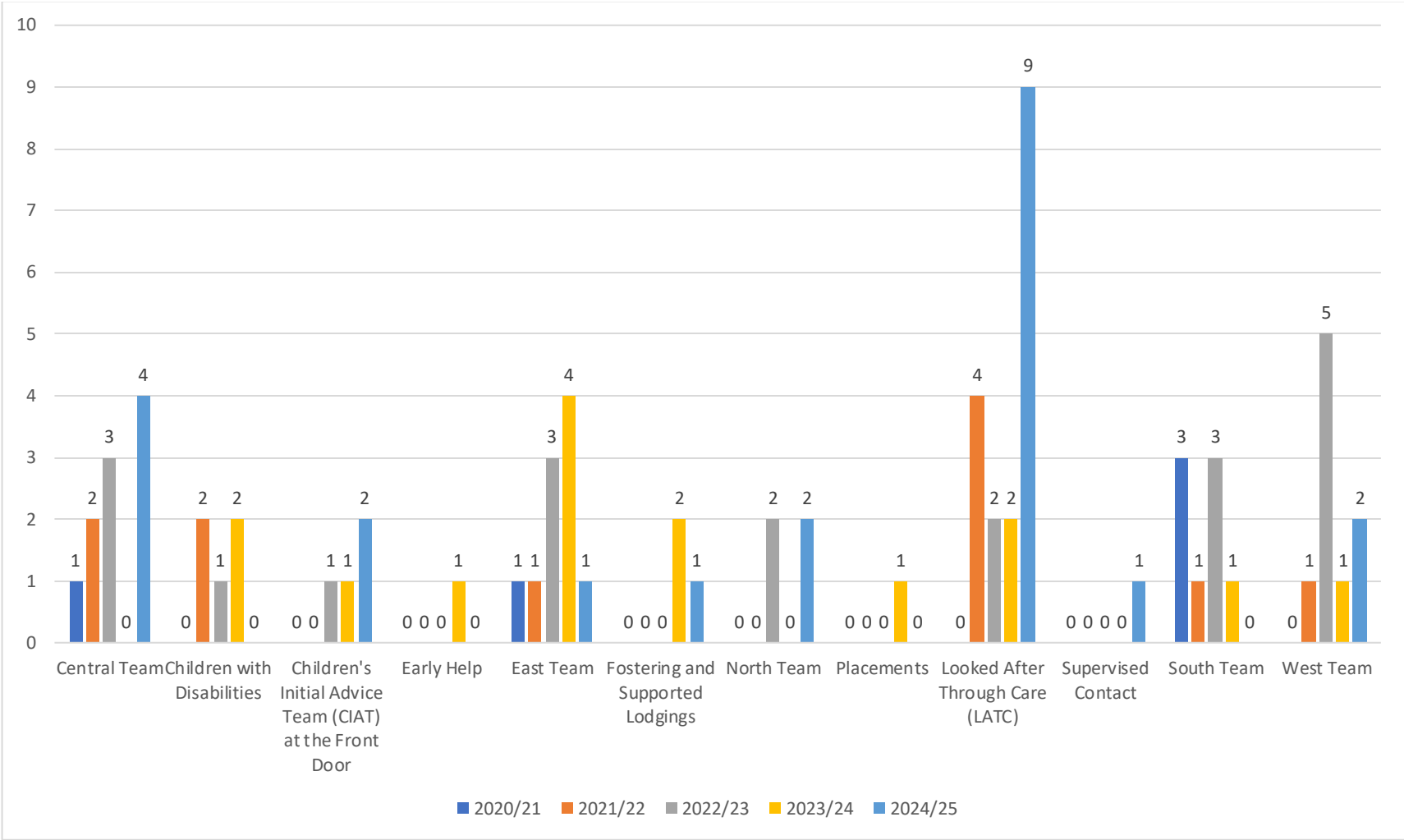


N.B. One complaint progressed directly to stage 2. Those teams that are not listed did not receive any complaints during 2024/25.

21. Central Team received six complaints, an increase from two in 2023/24. The most common cause of complaint was people's dissatisfaction with the attitude/behaviour of the social worker.
22. Children with Disabilities received four complaints, a decrease from 12 in 2023/24, and there were no identifiable themes.
23. Children's Initial Advice Team (CIAT) at the Front Door received two complaints, an increase from one in 2023/24 and 2023/23. The only identifiable theme was dissatisfaction with communication.
24. Early Help received zero complaints, a decrease from one in 2023/24.
25. East Team received five complaints, a decrease from 12 in 2023/24. The only identifiable theme was dissatisfaction with communication.
26. Fostering and Supported Lodgings received two complaints, the same number as in 2023/24, and there were no identifiable themes.
27. Independent Reviewing Officers received one complaint, the same as in 2023/24.
28. North Team received five complaints, a decrease from eight in 2023/24. Three of the complaints received concerned staff attitude/behaviour.
29. Placements received zero complaints, a decrease from one in 2023/24.
30. Residential Care received zero complaints, a decrease from one in 2023/24.
31. Looked After Through Care (LATC) received 18 complaints, an increase from nine in 2023/24. The most common cause of complaint was poor communication; other identifiable themes were delays in progressing matters and dissatisfaction with decisions.
32. South Team received seven complaints, an increase from four in 2023/24. The only identifiable theme was dissatisfaction with communication.
33. Strengthening Families received zero complaints, a decrease from one in 2023/24.
34. Supervised Contact received one complaint, the same number as in 2023/24.
35. West Team received four complaints, a decrease from nine in 2023/24, and there were no identifiable themes.

Breakdown of Stage 2 Complaints by Service Area/Team

36. 22 complaints were investigated at Stage 2, an increase from 15 in 2023/24, 20 in 2022/23, 12 in 2021/22 and seven in 2020/21. One was subsequently suspended under Regulation 8, as a result of concurrent court proceedings.

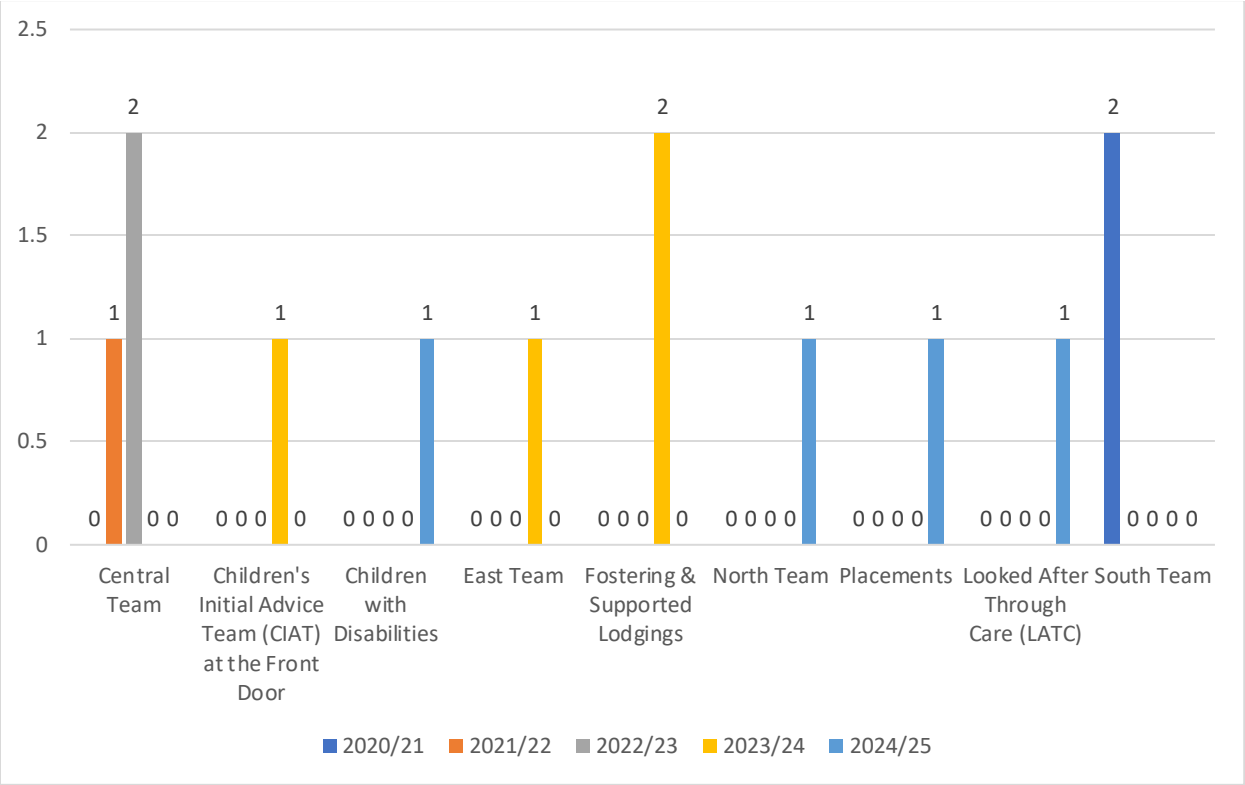


N.B. Those teams that are not listed did not receive any complaints during 2024/25.

37. Central Team received four stage 2 complaints, an increase from zero in 2023/24. Complainants were dissatisfied with decisions, the actions of the social worker and their attitude/behaviour.
38. Children with Disabilities received zero stage 2 complaints, a decrease from 2 in 2023/24.
39. Children's Initial Advice Team (CIAT) at the Front Door received two stage 2 complaints, an increase from one in 2023/24.
40. Early Help received zero stage 2 complaints, a decrease from one in 2023/24.
41. East Team received one stage 2 complaint, a decrease from four in 2023/24.
42. Fostering and Supported Lodgings received one stage 2 complaint, a decrease from two in 2023/24.
43. North Team received two stage 2 complaints, an increase from zero in 2023/24.
44. Placements received zero stage 2 complaints, a decrease from one in 2023/24.
45. Looked After Through Care (LATC) received nine stage 2 complaints, an increase from two in 2023/24. The most common cause of complaint was lack of communication.
46. South Team received zero stage 2 complaints, a decrease from one in 2023/24.
47. West Team received two stage 2 complaints, an increase from one in 2023/24.

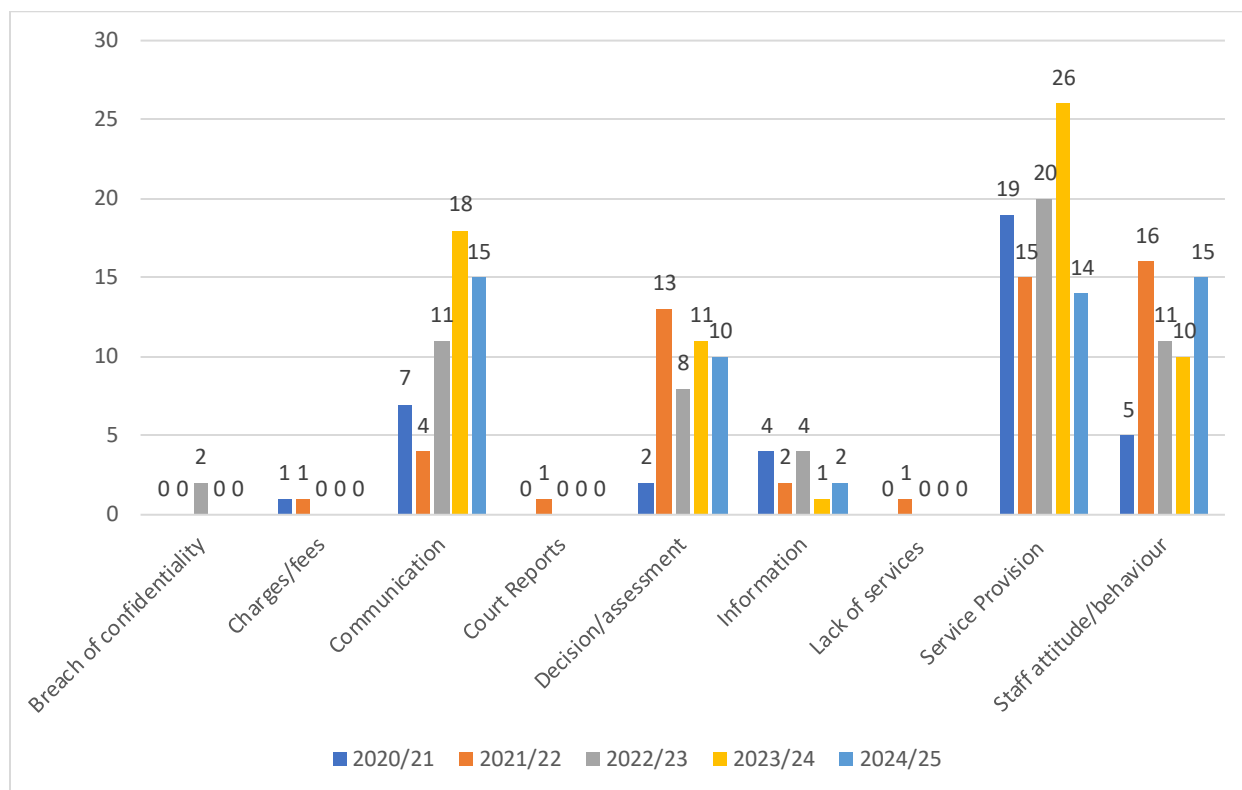
Breakdown of Stage 3 complaints by Service Area/Team

48. Four complaints were escalated to Stage 3, the same number as in 2023/24, an increase from two in 2022/23, one in 2021/22 and two in 2020/21.



N.B. Those teams that are not listed did not receive any complaints during 2024/25.

Breakdown of complaints by Issue



49. Communication and staff attitude/behaviour were the joint most commonly complained about issues in 2024/25. The Council received 15 complaints about communication, a decrease from 18 in 2023/24, although an increase from 11 in 2022/23, 4 in 2021/22 and 7 in 2020/21. The Council also received 15 complaints about staff attitude/behaviour, an increase from 10 complaints in 2023/24, 11 in 2022/23, a decrease from 16 in 2021/22 and an increase from five 2020/21.

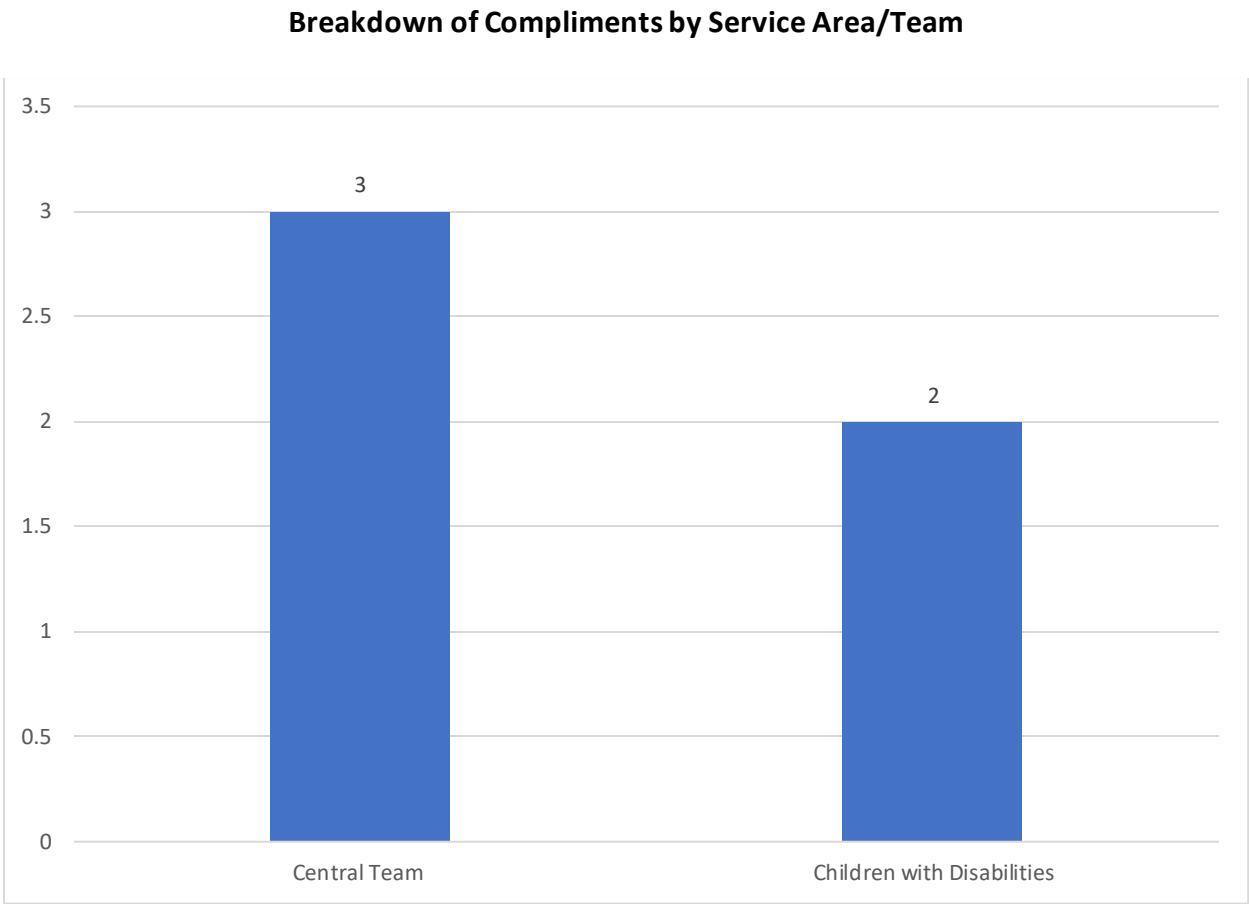
50. Service/provision was the second commonly complained about issue in 2024/25. The Council received 14 complaints, a significant decrease from 26 in 2023/24, a decrease from 20 in 2022/23, 15 in 2021/22 and 19 in 2020/21.

51. Decision/assessment was the third most complained about issues in 2024/25. The Council received 10 complaints about this issue, a decrease from 11 in 2023/24, an increase from 8 in 2022/23, a decrease from 13 in 2021/22 and an increase from two 2020/21.

52. The Council also received two complaints about information, an increase from one in 2023/24, a decrease from four in 2022/23, the same number as in 2021/22 and a decrease from four in 2020/21.

Breakdown of Comments by Service Area/Team

53. The Council did not receive any comments during 2024/25, 2023/24 or 2022/23, a decrease from one during 2021/22, and the same number as in 2020/21.



54. Children’s Services received five compliments, a decrease from six in 2023/24, eight in 2022/23 and 2021/22 and 15 in 2020/21.

Complaint Outcomes

Stage 1 - The below table shows the decisions reached on Stage 1 complaints during 2024/25.

Service Area/Team	Escalated to Stage 2 (No S1 Response)	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
Children with Disabilities	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Independent Reviewing Officers	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Children's Initial Advice Team	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Supervised Contact	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
North Team	0	0	1	3	0	1	5
East Team	0	0	1	2	1	2	6
South Team	0	0	0	2	0	1	3
West Team	1	0	2	1	0	2	6
Central Team	0	0	5	0	0	1	6
Children with Disabilities	0	0	0	4	1	0	5
Looked After Through Care (LATC)	1	0	7	4	1	3	16
Fostering & Supported Lodgings	0	0	1	0	1	1	3
Totals	2	0	18	18	5	11	54

Stage 2 - The below table shows the decisions reached on Stage 2 complaints during 2024/25.

Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
Children's Initial Advice Team	0	0	1	1	0	2
Supervised Contact	0	0	1	0	0	1
North Team	0	0	2	1	0	3
East Team	0	0	1	1	1	3
South Team	0	0	1	0	0	1
West Team	0	0	1	0	0	1
Placements	0	0	1	0	0	1
Looked After Through Care (LATC)	0	1	3	2	0	6
Fostering & Supported Lodgings	1	0	0	0	0	1
Totals	1	1	11	5	1	19

Stage 3 - The below table shows the decisions reached on Stage 3 complaints during 2024/25.

Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
North Team	0	1	0	0	0	1
Placements	0	0	1	0	0	1
Looked After Through Care (LATC)	0	0	1	0	0	1
Totals	0	1	2	0	0	3

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) Complaints

55. One complaint was referred to the LGSCO during 2024/25, a decrease from three in 2023/24.

56. One complaint was determined by the LGSCO during 2024/25, a decrease from three in 2023/24.

Organisational Learning

57. All resolution and organisational learning actions identified as a result of complaints are assigned to a responsible manager and progress against those actions is monitored by the Complaints Manager. In addition to those actions taken to resolve individual complaints several service improvements were made following complaint investigations during 2024/25. Some examples of these are detailed below.

Children's Initial Advice Team (CIAT) at the Front Door

58. Children's Services should consider a review of the skills and knowledge base of its Initial Advice Team to ensure contacts relating to children with disabilities are responded to consistently.

59. Children's Services considered an urgent update of its Children with Disabilities eligibility criteria document.

60. Darlington Borough Council remind social workers of the importance of good communication with service users, including checking how best to communicate with them.

61. Darlington Borough Council agreed to advise staff providing responses to complaints raised by service users of the need to send the response to the Complaints Team.

62. Darlington Borough Council agreed to advise staff providing stage 1 responses that the service user should be advised of their right to escalate the complaint to stage 2 if they remain dissatisfied.

East Team

63. Agreed to ensure they have adequate processes in place that assist social workers in undertaking necessary inquiries where a parent is in prison and wanting contact with a child.

64. Agreed to reminder to all social workers and team managers of the importance of detailed and timely case recording.

North Team

65. Agreed to remind staff of the correct process for Section 20, and the importance of ensuring parents understand what they are consenting to, and this is recorded, including a copy of the signed order.

- 66. Agreed to remind staff of the importance of accurate case recording particularly in reference to significant information and decision making.
- 67. Reviewed processes within Business Support services, to assure themselves that any contacts or referrals received by them, that bypass the front door, are appropriately recorded within case records, rather than being sent by e-mail to the allocated social worker.
- 68. Agreed to review training for frontline staff in terms of conscious/unconscious bias, with consideration given to how this can impact decision making.
- 69. Agreed to review practice to ensure statutory visits are undertaken during the Child Protection Process.

Placements

- 70. Reminded officers of the importance of timely communication with parents in accordance with the Council's Customer Standards.

Looked After Through Care (LATC)

- 71. Agreed to provide an update to social workers and managers regarding their duties and responsibilities under Section 47 of The Children Act 1989, in respect of gathering relevant information and including foster carers where the allegations is against them.
- 72. Darlington Borough Council Children's Services agreed to consider a review of how important personal documents are adequately recorded, stored, and returned to the owner, as part of a concurrent data breach investigation under the UK General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).
- 73. Reminded social workers of the importance of regular and effective communication with connected carers, particularly around issues of family time.
- 74. Asked that the Principal Social Worker to consider the guidance in place around communication with families of children in care as part of next review.
- 75. Reminded staff of the importance of accurate recording and reviewing of contact arrangements within care planning.

Performance against the Children's Social Care Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure

77. The below performance measures are in relation to those complaints responded to during 2024/25.

Timescales

Stage 1

78. The target for responding to a complaint at stage 1 is 10 working days, with a possible extension of up to 20 working days if the complaint is complex.

- (a) 38.6% of stage 1 complaint responses were sent within 10 working days. This was a decrease in performance from 50.9% in 2023/24.
- (b) A further 28.1% of stage 1 complaint responses were sent within 20 working days.
- (c) In total 66.7% of stage 1 complaint responses were sent within the maximum 20 working day timescale, a decrease in performance from 76.5% in 2023/24.

Stage 2

79. The target for responding to a complaint at stage 2 is 25 working days, extendable up to a maximum of 65 working days.

- (a) 5.3% of stage 2 complaint responses were sent within 25 working days during 2024/25, a decrease from 6.3% in 2023/24.
- (b) 5.3% of stage 2 complaint responses were sent within the maximum timescale allowed (65 working days), a decrease in performance from 12.5% in 2023/24.
- (c) 94.7% of stage 2 complaint responses were sent after 65 working days, a decrease in performance from 87.5% in 2023/24.

Stage 3

80. At stage 3 the Review Panel should be held within 30 working days of the request. 75% of Review Panels were held within 30 working days.

81. The Review Panel should write to the Director within 5 working days of the panel. They did so in 75% of cases.

82. The Director should write to the complainant within 15 working days of receiving the Panel's response. The Director wrote to the complainants within 15 working days in 100% of cases, as was the case in 2023/24.

Performance against key performance indicators

83. In relation to children's social care complaints the Council's key performance indicator is the number of upheld decisions received from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO). Children's Services received zero upheld decisions during 2024/25, a decrease from two in 2023/24, the same number as in 2022/23 and 2021/22 and a decrease from one in 2020/21.
84. Full details of those complaints determined by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman are included in the Cabinet reports of 9 September 2025 entitled [Review of Outcome of Complaints Made to Ombudsman](#).

Further recommendations

85. Children's Services and the Complaints Manager should work to improve the timeliness and quality of stage 1 responses, ensuring lessons are learned in order to reduce the overall number of complaints received and the number progressing to stages 2 and 3. The Complaints Manager has already ran several in house training sessions for staff required to respond to stage 1 complaints.
86. Children's Services and the Complaints Manager should work to performance against stage 2 response timescale.