

CABINET
8 SEPTEMBER 2026

COMPLAINTS, COMPLIMENTS AND COMMENTS ANNUAL REPORTS 2025/26

Councillor Mandy Porter, Resources Portfolio

Elizabeth Davison, Executive Director Resources and Governance

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide Cabinet with the 2025/26 Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Reports for:
 - Adult Social Care (**Appendix 2**);
 - Children's Social Care (**Appendix 3**);
 - Corporate (**Appendix 4**);
 - Housing (**Appendix 5**); and
 - Public Health (**Appendix 6**).

Summary

2. It is important that the Council's complaints, compliments and comments procedures are accessible so people can tell us what they think about the services we provide. The Council constantly strives to ensure an organisational culture in which complaints are accepted, owned and resolved as quickly as possible and one in which learning from complaints is used to improve services.
3. The Council received a total of 780 complaints during 2025/26, an increase from 747 in 2024/25 and 746 in 2023/24.
4. The Council received a total of 226 compliments in 2025/26, an increase from 219 2024/25, and a decrease from 231 in 2023/24.
5. The Council received a total of 61 comments during 2025/26, an increase from 45 in 2024/25, and a decrease from 77 in 2023/24.
6. A summary table is provided at **Appendix 1**.
7. The production of an annual report in respect of representations received under the Adult Social Care Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure is a requirement of the

Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009.

8. The production of an annual report in respect of representations received under the Children's Social Care Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure is a requirement of the Children Act 1989 Representation Procedure (England) Regulations 2006.
9. The production of an annual report in respect of representations received under the Public Health Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure is a requirement of the NHS Bodies and Local Authorities (Partnership Arrangements, Care Trusts, Public Health and Local Healthwatch) Regulations 2012.
10. The production of an annual report in respect of representations received under the Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure is a requirement of the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, which became statutory on 1 April 2024. To comply with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, Cabinet should discuss the Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Report as appropriate, particularly in relation to understanding drivers of complaints and acting to resolve concerns.
11. The production of an annual report in respect of representations received under the Corporate Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure is a requirement of the new Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, which the Ombudsman issued as 'advice and guidance' for all local councils in England under section 23(12A) of the Local Government Act 1974.

Recommendations

12. It is recommended that:
 - (a) That Cabinet notes the content of and discusses the attached reports.
 - (b) That Cabinet endorses the further recommendations made in the Corporate, Children's and Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Reports.

Reasons

13. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:
 - (a) To make Cabinet aware of the number and nature of the complaints, compliments and comments received by the Council and the resulting organisational learning.
 - (b) To ensure the Council is:
 - i. Complying with the Children Act 1989 Representation Procedure (England) Regulations 2006;
 - ii. Complying with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code;

- iii. Complying with the pre-inspection advice provided in anticipation of an inspection by the Regulator of Social Housing;
- iv. Complying with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code;
- v. Complying with the Council's Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedures; and
- vi. To improve satisfaction with complaints handling.

Elizabeth Davison
Executive Director Resources and Governance

Background Papers

- 14. 2025/26 Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Reports for:
 - (a) Adult Social Care (**Appendix 2**);
 - (b) Children's Social Care (**Appendix 3**);
 - (c) Corporate (**Appendix 4**);
 - (d) Housing (**Appendix 5**); and
 - (e) Public Health (**Appendix 6**).
- 15. The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009.
- 16. The Children Act 1989 Representation Procedure (England) Regulations 2006.
- 17. The NHS Bodies and Local Authorities (Partnership Arrangements, Care Trusts, Public Health and Local Healthwatch) Regulations 2012.
- 18. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.
- 19. The Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.

Lee Downey: Extension 5451

Council Plan	Learning from complaints contributes towards the delivery of the priorities in the Plan.
Addressing inequalities	Learning from complaints, compliments and comments contributes to addressing inequality.
Tackling Climate Change	Learning from complaints, compliments and comments contributes to tackling climate change.
Efficient and effective use of resources	The revised procedures aim to improve the efficiency with which complaints are handled. The recommendations contained within the appended reports aim to reduce risk and improve efficiency in the way we interact with our customers.
Health and Wellbeing	Learning from complaints, compliments and comments contributes to the effective delivery and the improved health and well-being of the population of Darlington.
S17 Crime and Disorder	Learning from complaints, compliments and comments contributes to the effective delivery of the Community Safety services.
Wards Affected	All.
Groups Affected	All.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not have a direct impact on the Budget and Policy Framework.
Key Decision	This report does not constitute a Key Decision.
Urgent Decision	This report does not require an Urgent Decision.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	The purpose of the Children's Social Care Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Report is, in part, to improve the service we provide to Looked After Children and Care Leavers.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

20. Our aim is to put people first and provide them with the best possible service. To make this aim a reality it is important people have the opportunity to tell us what they think about the services we provide. The Council's Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedures are one way they can do this. They can tell us when we get things wrong so we can put them right. They can also tell us when we get things right, make comments about the things we do and suggest new ways of doing things.
21. We understand that sometimes it is difficult to complain and work hard to ensure an organisational culture in which complaints are seen as a positive means of engagement and an opportunity for the Council to learn and improve services. If people do need to complain we always take their concerns seriously, treat them fairly and with respect and assure them they will not receive a poorer service as a result.

22. There was an increase in the number of complaints received compared to 2024/25. There was a decrease in the number of compliments received and an increase in the number of comments received. Full details are attached at Appendix 2.
24. There was a significant increase in the number of complaints received at Stage 1 of the procedure compared to 2024/25. However, there was a decrease in the number of complaints escalated to Stage 2. There was also an increase in the number of complaints progressed to Stage 3. There was an increase in the number of compliments received, while no comments were received. Full details are attached at Appendix 3.
25. There was an increase in the number of complaints received. There was a decrease in the number of compliments received, and an increase in the number of comments received. Full details are attached at Appendix 4.
26. There was a decrease in the number of Stage 1 complaints received. There was also a decrease in the number of Stage 2 complaints received. There was an increase in the number of compliments received and in the number of comments received. Full details are attached at Appendix 5.
27. The number of representations made under the Public Health Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure during 2025/26 remained low. The Council did not receive any complaints, compliments or comments a decrease from one complaint and one comment in 2024/25. Full details are attached at Appendix 6.
28. Some examples of organisational learning resulting from complaints have been extracted from the appended reports and are provided below:

Adult Social Care Complaints:

- (a) In response to a complaint the Adult Learning Disability team agreed to improve communication protocols to ensure that long-term absences of social workers are clearly communicated to individuals and carers and alternative points of contact are provided. It was also agreed social workers would provide clear and detailed guidance to families regarding available services, including explanations of what each service offers and how to access them.
- (b) Following a complaint about a care home it was agreed that Adult Services provide further training on strength-based practice and the importance of relationship based social work to support positive outcomes. It was also agreed the Finance Team would arrange refresher training and that social workers would have access to information on financial assessments and other issues including best interest assessments, discharge planning and specialist services provided by partner agencies which they could sign post to. Furthermore, it was agreed the Council would ensure that care providers undertake checks/audits with people on short break stays to ensure they are aware of charging policies.
- (c) Following a complaint, it was agreed that the care home would implement mandatory training on professional conduct and managing challenging behaviours for all staff. It was also agreed that the care home would maintain DoLS documentation at the front of care records and this would be subject to monitoring/audit. The Local Authority

learned lessons in relation to following safeguarding processes in a timely manner, communication and improved documentation to avoid delays in enquiries and feedback to families.

- (d) In response to a complaint about a financial assessment, it was agreed a reminder would be sent to social workers and the Brokerage Team that packages must be added to the system in a timely manner. It was also agreed consideration would be given to the suspension of Direct Payments if the individual is moving into respite or a residential placement, to stop non-residential invoices being raised.

Children's Social Care Complaints:

- (e) Children's Services agreed to share learning from a complaint with Darlington's Safeguarding Partnership and make a specific request of the partnership to review the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) guidance accordingly and to explicitly state that fathers and other relevant care givers must be included in all child safeguarding enquiries where safe to do so.
- (f) Following a complaint for Central Team it was agreed, social workers would support families to fully understand the content of Court Orders and the implications for, and responsibilities of the Local Authority regarding any directions made. It was also agreed that social workers would ensure that when composing minutes the discussion had during a meeting is accurately recorded. Furthermore, social workers were reminded that where there are significant concerns about the nature of the parent's relationship, they should establish with certainty whether there should be split forums. Social Workers were reminded to ensure that minutes from meetings are circulated to parents including child/young persons in need reviews and plans. It was also agreed social workers and team managers would be reminded of the expectations of the Recording Policy and Guidance, in particular providing a three-monthly case file recording giving a succinct summary of the work undertaken, specifically linking progress to the recommendation/outcomes of the plan.
- (g) In response to a complaint for Safeguarding & Looked After Through Care (LATC), Children's Services agreed to ensure clarity of their procedures in relation to effective case recording, and for staff to be reminded that that all relevant communication must be recorded to reflect the child's journey and for transparency.
- (h) As a result of a complaint for LATC, social workers and team managers were advised emails from service users or their network should be acknowledged, timescales should be identified for actions and actions followed through with feedback given in a timely manner.

Corporate Complaints:

- (i) Following several complaints for the Complaints & Information Governance Team about delays in responding to complaints and information requests, the Council increased the resource within the team and are currently working on a project to digitise historic social care records.

- (j) As a result of a complaint about Lifeline, monitoring practices were improved and a monthly report is now created for any clients who have not used or tested their equipment in the previous month. A clear procedure is now in place requiring all 'lost mobile connectivity' alerts generated by the Cloud Management Platform to be logged, reviewed within a defined timescale, and followed by a documented decision (e.g. monitoring, customer contact, or inspection visit). Where alerts relate to equipment that relies solely on 2G connectivity, particularly for elderly or high-risk users, the alert is treated as an elevated risk and escalated accordingly.
- (k) In response to several complaints about School Admissions & Transport it was agreed officers would advise parents without delay when an operator terminates a contract or the Council is waiting for an alternative solution to be sourced, so parents are aware of potential disruption.
- (l) Having considered a complaint for ASB & Civic Enforcement, the Civic Enforcement Operational Manager and officers obtained appropriate signage for their uniforms the use of body worn video Cameras.

Housing Complaints:

- (m) Following a complaint for Building Surveying about mould a reminder was sent regarding what should be booked as an emergency after a call out job was raised incorrectly following a contractor visit. This has resulted in better priority diagnosis by our planning team.
 - (n) In response to complaint for general trades, it was agreed that the process would be reviewed to ensure planners make more than one attempt to book repair jobs in using different methods, such as calls, texts and letters. As a result, further attempts are now being made.
 - (o) As a consequence of a complaint for Internal Planned Maintenance, officers agreed to review the major works process to establish if adaptations will be affected by works carried out (e.g. increase in the number of steps to the property). As a result, surveying officers will arrange for an Occupational Therapist visit where any work may affect current adaptations to ensure the tenants needs remain supported.
 - (p) As a result of a complaint for Tenancy Enforcement consideration was given to introducing a quality assurance process in respect of tenancy breach letters. As a result, increased checking is carried out prior to a breach being issued and will be reviewed accordingly.
29. The further recommendations set out in the Children's, Corporate and Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Reports are.

Adult Social Care

- (a) The Complaints & Information Governance Team should work to improve performance against the 3 working day acknowledgment target.
- (b) Adult Social Care should work to improve performance against their 40 working day response target.

- (c) Finance (Adults/Housing) and the Adult Learning Disability Team should work to reduce the number of complaints that exceeded the maximum six-month time limit set in the Regulations.

Children's Social Care Complaints

- (d) Children's Services should seek to address the common causes of complaints i.e. staff attitude/behaviour and communication issues. To that end the Council is relaunching its Relational Practice training during 2026/27.
- (e) Children's Services and the Complaints Manager should work to improve the timeliness and quality of stage one responses. The Complaints Manager ran several in house training sessions for staff required to respond to stage one complaints during 2025/26.
- (f) Children's Services and the Complaints Manager should work to improve performance against stage two response timescale.

Corporate Complaints

- (g) The Complaints & Information Governance Team should continue to work to improve compliance with the new Stage 1 and 2 timescales introduced by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.

Consultation

- 30. No consultation was required in preparing this report.

Total Representations by Year

Type of representation	2025/26	2024/25	2023/24
Corporate			
Stage 1 complaints	476	467	463
Direct to Stage 2 complaints	24	21	14
Direct to Ombudsman	0	0	0
<i>Total complaints</i>	<i>500</i>	<i>488</i>	<i>477</i>
Stage 1 escalated to Stage 2	71	52	70
<i>Total Stage 2 complaints</i>	<i>95</i>	<i>73</i>	<i>84</i>
Adult Social Care	49	39	61
Children's Social Care			
Stage 1 complaints	76	55	65
Direct to Stage 2 complaints	0	1	1
<i>Total complaints</i>	<i>76</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>66</i>
Stage 1 escalated to Stage 2	15	21	14
<i>Total Stage 2 complaints</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>15</i>
Stage 3 complaints	5	4	4
Housing			
Stage 1 complaints	155	163	140
Direct to Stage 2 complaints	0	0	0
<i>Total complaints</i>	<i>155</i>	<i>163</i>	<i>140</i>
Stage 1 escalated to Stage 2	21	27	30
<i>Total Stage 2 complaints</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>30</i>
Public Health	0	1	2
Total Complaints	780	747	746
Corporate	155	143	130
Adult Social Care	28	42	39
Children's Social Care	9	5	6
Housing	34	29	55
Public Health	0	0	1
Total Compliments	226	219	231
Corporate	59	44	77
Adult Social Care	1	0	0
Children's Social Care	0	0	0
Housing	1	0	0
Public Health	0	1	0
Total Comments	61	45	77