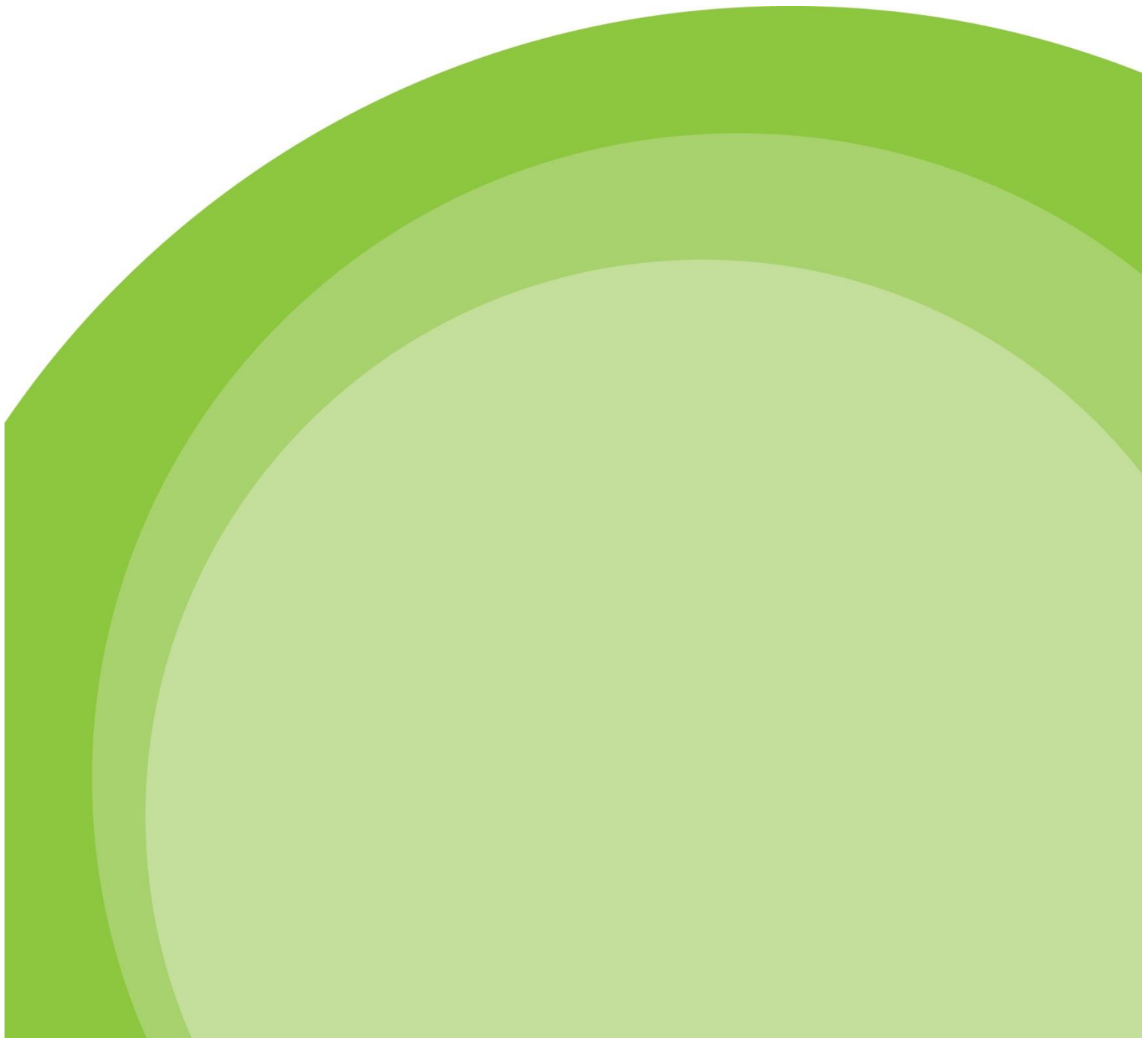




# Children's Social Care Services

Customer Feedback – Compliments/Complaints  
Annual Report (1<sup>st</sup> April 2016 – 31 March 2017)  
Not Protected



## Contents

Chapter	Page
Introduction	3
Executive Summary	4
Representations Made to Central Bedfordshire Council	5
Compliments Received Analysis	8
Complaints Received Analysis	10
Equality and Diversity Monitoring	15
Outcomes from Concluded Complaints	19
Performance in Complaint Handling	20
Learning and Service Improvements from Complaints	22
Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) Complaints	24
Monitoring and Quality Assurance	26
Customer Relations Team – Supporting Children’s Social Care	28

If you have any comments on this report, please contact Paula Terry, Customer Relations Manager on 0300 300 6077 or [Paula.Terry@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Paula.Terry@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

## Introduction

This report fulfils the Council's statutory duty to monitor the effectiveness of the complaints procedure and produce an annual report for Children's Services social care complaints.

This report provides statistics for 2016/17 on the number of compliments and complaints received; a summary of complaint causes; the number of complaints that were well founded (upheld fully or in part); performance; the actions taken to improve services as a consequence of complaints; complaints considered by the Local Government Ombudsman and the effectiveness of the complaints procedure.

The report will be presented to the relevant local authority committee and will be made available on the Council's website.

## The Complaints Procedure

The Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 (as amended by the NHS & Community Care Act 1990) requires us to establish a procedure for considering complaints in relation to the discharge of, or failure to discharge, any social services functions in respect of a qualifying individual. The Children Act 1989 Representation Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 provides the legal framework for the procedures in relation to social care functions.

The regulations require the local authority to attempt to resolve complaints as soon as reasonably practicable and within specific timescales. The procedure has three stages, which are set out below, however where appropriate and with the agreement of the complainant the local authority may arrange for conciliation, mediation or other alternative dispute resolution to help resolve matters.

- Stage 1 (Local resolution by manager) – 10 working days or up to 20 working days for complex cases
- Stage 2 (Investigation by someone outside of the service area complained about) - 25 working days with maximum extension to 65 working days
- Stage 3 (Independent Review) – 30 working days to convene and hold a review panel; then 5 working days for the panel to issue its findings; and a further 15 working days for the local authority to respond to those findings

All complaints are triaged to ensure they are suitable for the process. This ensures matters are managed through the correct procedures, should an alternative process be in place. Any matters which are not suitable for the complaints process are filtered out and passed to the appropriate channel.

If customers remain dissatisfied with the Council's handling of the complaint they can refer to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). The LGO is an independent body that can consider complaints about the Council.

## **Executive Summary**

### **Children's Social Care**

19 compliments were received in 2016/17 for Children's Social Care services with instances of customers telling us that services were getting it right and having a positive impact on their lives.

There were 57 new complaints received, 46 of which were managed through the complaints procedure (8 directly from children and young people). The remaining issues related to child protection, legal process, where there is a review process in place, or where the complainant disengaged with the complaints procedure. These cases were filtered out and where appropriate passed to alternative channels already in place to manage those issues.

50 stage 1 complaints were concluded. Complaints were seen as important feedback for services and a means of considering how to improve. Managers listened to customers' views with 60% of stage 1 complaints either upheld fully or in part. The main reason for complaints this year related to customer care/communication issues and staff conduct/attitude.

Performance in complaints handling has fallen since last year in that 72% (compared to 84%) of complaints received a stage 1 response within 20 working days or less. Individual cases had specific remedies put in place and the majority of wider service improvements resulted in reviews of some of the current processes in place within Children's Social Care.

There was no stage 2 or stage 3 complaints.

The LGO considered six complaints about Central Bedfordshire Council's Children's Social Care Services during the period. The LGO decided not to investigate in four of those cases as it was satisfied that the local authority had addressed those complaints appropriately. The remaining two cases progressed to investigation by the Ombudsman. Both cases were pending a decision at the end of the period.

### **Effectiveness**

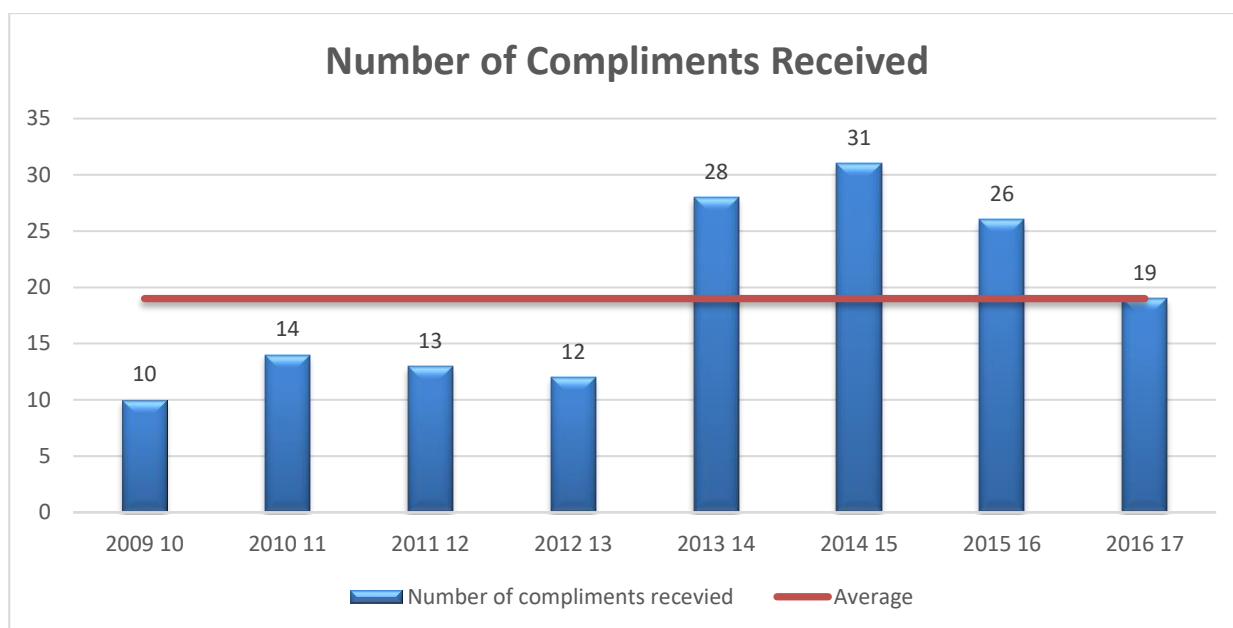
The activity for this reporting period shows the complaints procedure has been effective at resolving customer complaints at a local level. Learning from the customer experience through complaints has led to improvements to practices however there is some room for improvement in managing complaints to timescales and to establish the root-cause of complaints to identify further learning for services.

# 1. Representations Made to Central Bedfordshire Council

## 1.1 Compliments Received

Compliments from service users and/or their representatives about service delivery are recorded under the Customer Feedback Procedure. Whilst Children's Services may seek and receive positive feedback from families and professionals via other mechanisms, the Customer Feedback Procedure captures compliments where the service user and/or representative has gone out of their way to provide praise and appreciation for the service provided to them.

19 compliments were recorded across Children's Social Care Services relating to good customer care and the quality of support to children and their families.

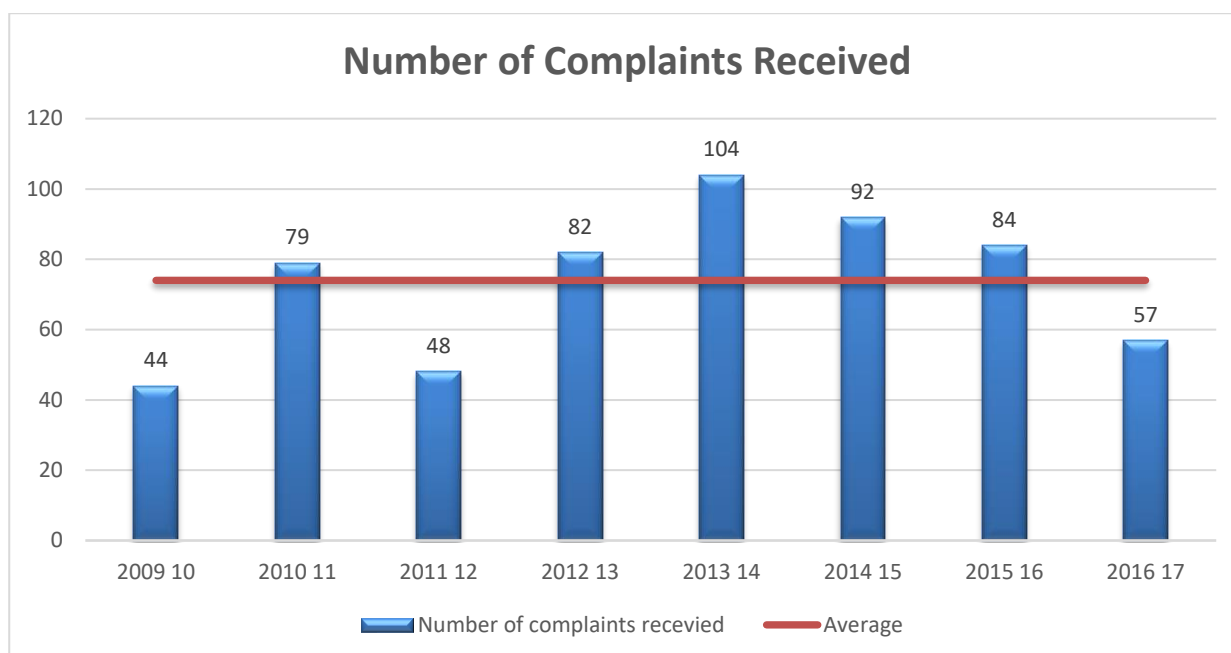


The number of compliments received in 2016/17 reduced from the number received in 2015/16 (by 27%). However, the number received in this period is in line with the average number of compliments received across Children's Social Care Services in previous years.

## 1.2 Complaints Received

A complaint may be generally defined as an expression of dissatisfaction or disquiet in relation to an individual child or young person, which requires a response.

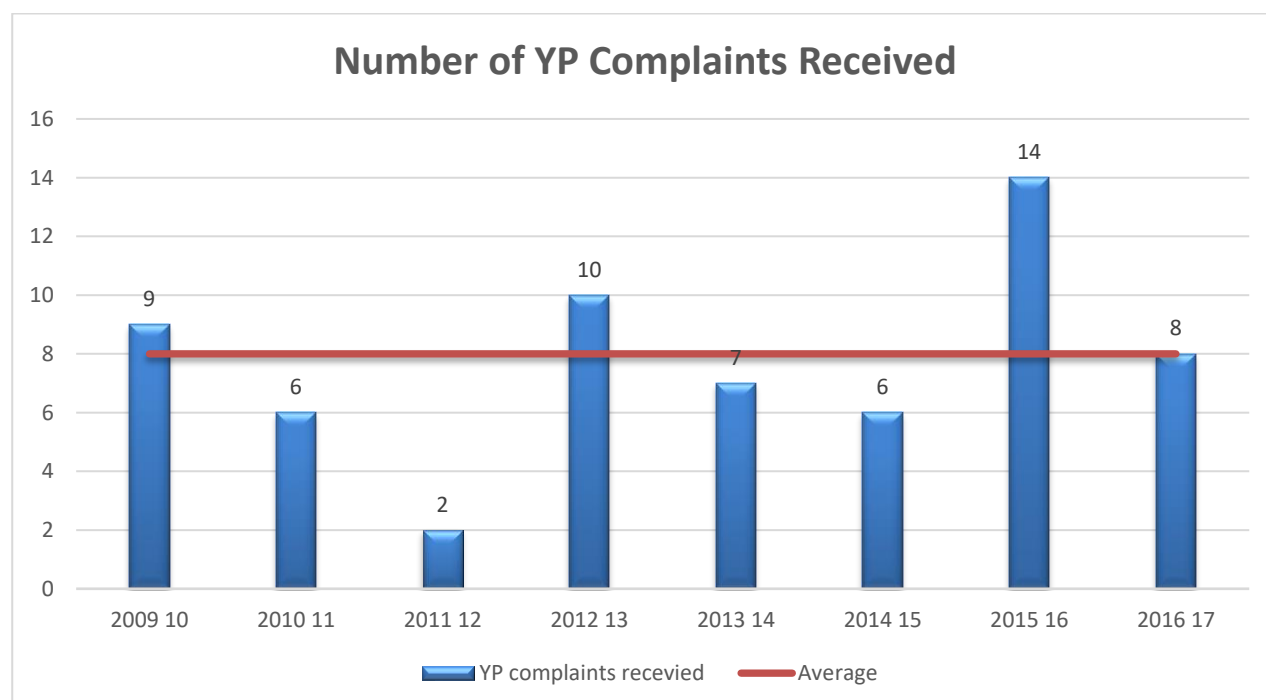
57 new complaints were received across Children's Social Care Services in 2016/17.



The number of new complaints received in 2016/17 has reduced from the number received in 2015/16 (by 32%). The number received in 2016/17 is below the average number of complaints received across Children's Social Care Services in previous years.

Of the 57 new complaints received, 46 were managed through the children's statutory complaints procedure at stage 1. The remaining complaints related to matters which were not suitable for the children's statutory complaints procedure i.e. child protection issues; legal matters; where there is a review process in place; or where the complainant disengaged with the procedure. These cases were filtered out and where appropriate they were passed to alternative channels already in place to manage those issues.

Of the 46 new complaints managed through the children's statutory complaints procedure at stage 1, 8 were received directly from children and young people.



The number of complaints received in 2016/17 directly from children and young people has decreased from those received in 2015/16 (by 43%). However, the number received in 2016/17 is in line with the average number of complaints received directly from children and young people across Children's Social Care Services in previous years.

## 2. Compliments Received Analysis

### 2.1 Compliments by Service Area

The below chart shows how the 19 compliments received across Children's Social Care in 2016/17 were distributed by service area:



The compliments received by each service area were above the average number they had received in previous years.

A breakdown of compliments received by service is detailed below along with a table which provides a general overview of the work each area undertakes.

Service Name	Description
Referral, Assessment & Intervention (12 compliments received)	Referral, Assessment & Intervention responds to all new referrals into Children's Services from professionals and the public where there are concerns around the welfare of children. If there is information to support the referral concerns the service will undertake a Child & Family Assessment and immediate child protection enquiries if children are deemed at significant risk. The service can also provide specialist support to manage risk in children's lives.
Family Support (5 compliments received)	Family Support provides advice, assistance and services to vulnerable children and families in need of support and protection. This can be provided within the home or within the local community. Family Support may need to protect children as part of child



	protection plans and may need to initiate legal proceedings if risks escalate to safeguard the child. Family Support also works with children who are privately fostered, those families who have no recourse to public funds and various other areas of need where statutory support is required.
Children with Disabilities (2 compliments received)	The Children with Disabilities Service provides support for children with a permanent or substantial disability from birth to age 18. The service operates a specialist referral process and offers a pathway from assessment to provision of service. The service promotes the welfare of disabled children and to enable parents to complete day to day tasks to keep their child living at home and included as a significant family member. The service also provides a range of support which offers disabled children the opportunity to aspire, develop and achieve in the different stages of their lives and transfer into adulthood.

### **Children with Disabilities**

Thanks to social worker for level of support provided to a family whose child passed away; family valued social worker's support

### **Family Support**

Social worker provided good support in Core Group Meeting at short notice; social worker has gone out of her way to be available for family; thanks for support (3)

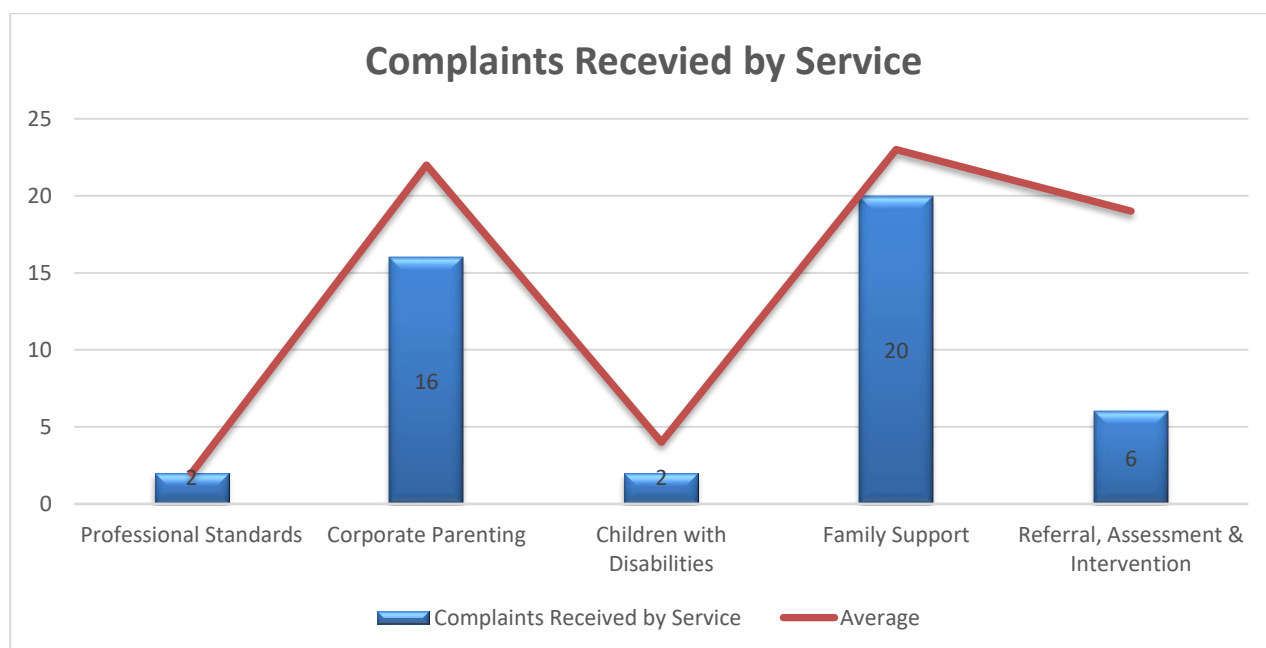
### **Referral, Assessment & Intervention**

Victim of domestic abuse praised social worker for not being judgemental and for putting her at ease; praise for professionalism & good practice (3); thanks for support (6); thanks for quick response; thanks to social worker for going above and beyond

### 3. Complaints Received Analysis

#### 3.1 Complaints by Service Area

The below analysis on complaints received is based upon the 46 complaints accepted into the children's statutory complaints process at stage 1 during 2016/17. The below chart shows complaints accepted into the process by service area.



The number of complaints managed at stage 1 by service area were either below or in line with the average number of complaints accepted into the process in previous years.

The below table provides a general overview of the work each area undertakes.

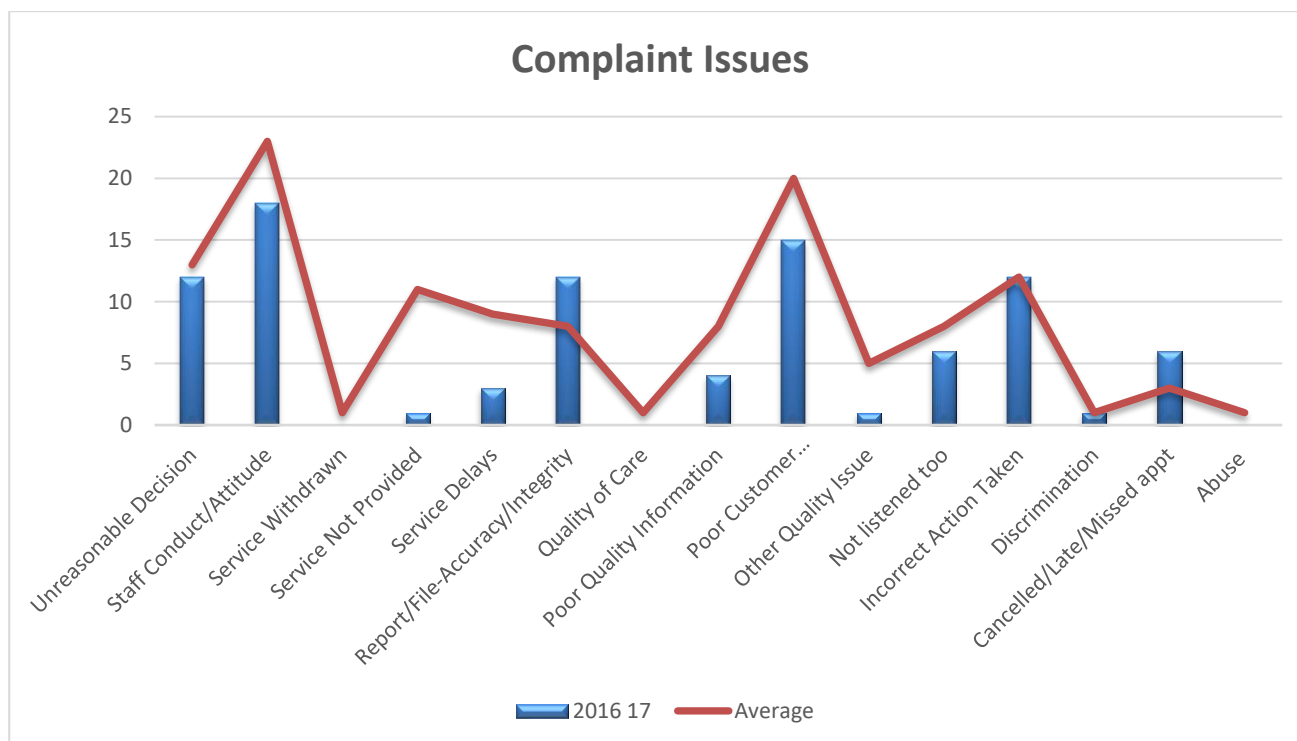
Service Name	Description
Referral, Assessment & Intervention (6 Complaints received)	Referral, Assessment & Intervention responds to all new referrals into Children's Services from professionals and the public where there are concerns around the welfare of children. If there is information to support the referral concerns the service will undertake a Child & Family Assessment and immediate child protection enquiries if children are deemed at significant risk. The service can also provide specialist support to manage risk in children's lives.
Family Support (20 complaints received)	Family Support provides advice, assistance and services to vulnerable children and families in need of support and protection. This can be provided within the home or within the local community. Family Support may need to protect children as part of child protection plans and may need to initiate

	<p>legal proceedings to safeguard a child if risks escalate. Family Support also works with children who are privately fostered, those families who have no recourse to public funds and various other areas of need where statutory support is required.</p>
<p>Children with Disabilities (2 complaints received)</p>	<p>The Children with Disabilities Service provides support for children with a permanent or substantial disability from birth to age 18. The service operates a specialist referral process and offers a pathway from assessment to provision of service. The service promotes the welfare of disabled children and to enable parents to complete day to day tasks to keep their child living at home and included as a significant family member. The service also provides a range of support which offers disabled children the opportunity to aspire, develop and achieve in the different stages of their lives and transfer into adulthood.</p>
<p>Corporate Parenting (16 complaints received)</p>	<p>The Corporate Parenting Service provides services to Looked after Children and Care Leavers aged 0 to 25 years old. The aim is to ensure this group of children and young people achieve the best possible outcomes. The service recruits, assesses and supports adopters and foster carers; finds placements for looked after children coming into care or changing placements; supports children subject to care proceedings; supports children in long term foster care; and supports those who are leaving care into independence.</p>
<p>Professional Standards (2 complaints received)</p>	<p>The Professional Standards service chairs Child Protection Conferences; chairs statutory reviews for Looked after Children; is responsible for undertaking quality assurance activity to support continuous service improvement; ensures that the voice of Looked after Children is effectively represented; provides independent advice to parents in respect of the education of children with special needs; and is responsible for the effective administration of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board.</p>

Of the 8 complaints received directly from children and young people in 2016/17, 1 was for the Referral, Assessment & Intervention Service; 1 was for the Family Support Service and 6 were for the Corporate Parenting Service.

### 3.2 Stage 1 – Complaint Issues

The below chart indicates the types of complaint issues received over the year at stage 1 during 2016/17. Each complaint received can have several aspects, so one complaint may cover a number of the types of complaint issues set out in the chart below.



The top two types of complaint issues in 2016/17 were in relation to staff conduct and poor customer care/communication. This is consistent with the top two types of complaint issues over previous years.

The above chart shows that compared to the average types of complaint issues received over previous years, 2016/17 saw a noticeable drop in complaints about services not being provided and service delays. The chart also demonstrates a rise in complaints about report/file accuracy and integrity.

Of the 8 complaints received directly from children and young people, the common type of complaint issue was around staff conduct. Complaints also reflected not feeling listened too; report accuracy; poor customer care/communication; incorrect action taken; unreasonable decision; and discrimination.

The breakdown of complaints received overall is detailed in the below table:

Complaint Causes	Breakdown of issues raised
Unreasonable Decision	Discussions held with child in an inappropriate setting and told a friend's address was safe to stay at when parent disagreed; Vindictive change to move contact sessions to a centre; Supported father who did not return children after contact; Agreed trip without children later used against parent; Unhappy with child being subject to a Child Protection Plan; Holiday refusal for looked after child during

	term time not considered properly; Preventing parent from having contact with child; Not fairly compensated for looking after a child; Not allowed to say goodbye to foster child; Refusal to review investigation into worker's conduct at a children's home; Disagreement with selection process for prospective adopters; Request for new Personal Advisor was refused due to worker availability;
Staff Conduct/Attitude	Police called to home without reason; Unprofessional behaviour; Dishonesty about discussing child maintenance with parent; Parent made to feel on edge; Rudeness; Raising voice; Disrespectful; New employer advised of parent's mental health issues; Lies around asking family members to look after children; Bullying behaviour towards parent; Lack of support during foster placement breakdown; Not allowing child to leave care home; Refusing leaving care allowance; Withdrew money but failed to apply for agreed passport and driving licence; Making a complaint influenced decision around adoption application; Broke into meter cupboard to check gas usage; Biased; Emotive
Service Not Provided	No work undertaken with complainant and young person;
Service Delays	Delay in signing forms to assist with legal aid; Delay in providing Child Protection and Court paperwork;
Report/File/Invoice/Integrity	Inaccurate information in assessment/report; Allegations included in assessment without complainant being given the opportunity to challenge/refute; Inflammatory comments in referral report from one department to another; Inaccurate details included in meeting minutes; Letter to parents wrongly interpreted domestic abuse;
Poor Quality Information	Wrong telephone number & lack of detail provided for temporary accommodation; Misled on EHCP process; Information about contact and CAMHS only provided to one parent; Poor information provided around reasons children cannot be returned to parental care;
Poor Customer Care/Communication	Lack of contact with family after agreed break following an accident; Lack of response; Lack of agreed action; Meeting minutes not sent; Not informed about meetings; Father not helped to source clothes or bedding when children were placed with him at short notice; Social worker allocated but did not make contact for 2 months; Key information not shared with parent; Report not shared in a timely manner; Poor explanations provided in relation to case management; Not told about leaving care grant and living allowance;
Other Quality Issue	Lack of contact arrangements;
Not Listened Too	Father's concerns about relatives looking after child were ignored; Concerns about child's welfare ignored; Branded an abuser without hearing complainants side; Requests to arrange full time education for looked after child were ignored; Request to assist with housing application were ignored;
Incorrect Action Taken	Failure to notify or gain parental permission to visit child at

	school; Social worker used incorrect car seat to transport child; Failure to act on breaches of working agreement; Irrelevant information in report i.e. current partner and child's name; Failure to follow procedure; Lack of handover between local authorities following family move; Pre-birth assessment not carried out until child was 2 months old; Failure to follow correct legal process in allowing parent to take children on holiday; Not provided with Pathway & Personal Education Plan; Failure to investigate a child protection disclosure; Unjustified referral between departments; Failure to arrange contact for more than a year;
Discrimination	Not included in activity offered to care leavers due to ethnicity;
Cancelled/Late/Missed Appt	Not arriving for meetings; Not carrying out agreed weekly meetings;

## 4. Equality and Diversity Monitoring

The purpose of capturing equalities data is to monitor access to the complaints procedure; to ensure services are appropriate for all service user groups; and to check whether any issues relating to discrimination have been raised. Data relates to the service user affected by the complaint or a person who has been affected by the actions taken by the service. For example; where a complaint is made by an adult (usually a parent/carer) about their own experience of intervention, the adult's data is captured as the service user.

Whilst information is not always provided by a complainant the system used for complaints has the facility to capture the service user's gender, ethnicity, age group and whether the service user describes themselves as having a disability or not.

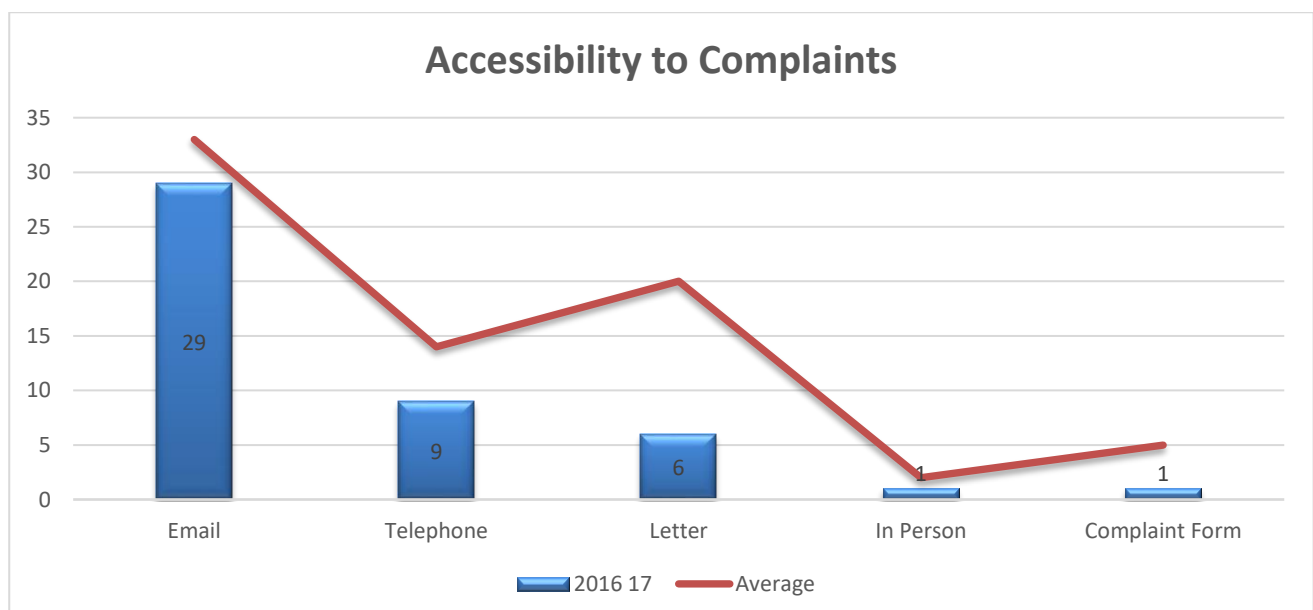
Customer Relations has undertaken work over the last year to ensure the system is meeting the current needs of equality and diversity monitoring and linking in with information that may already be held in this respect about our service users. The improvements made in this area will enable us to undertake further analysis in relation to complaint trends and accessibility over the coming years.

The below analysis on complaints received is based upon the 46 complaints accepted into the children's statutory complaints process at stage 1.

### 4.1 Accessibility to Complaints

By having a range of contact options for complainants to make their complaints the Council aims to meet the needs of its service users in accessing the complaints procedure. People can make complaints in person; face to face; or via telephone (including a direct line to Customer Relations); in writing; via email; letter; or complaint form (a complaint form specifically designed for young people is available). Complaints can be made by a representative of the service user or an advocate.

The below chart shows which method of communication the 46 complainants used to contact the Council in 2016/17.





Email was the preferred choice for customers to contact the Council in 2016/17 in relation to making complaints, with over half being received via this method. The averages detailed in the above chart show that email has consistently been the preferred option over previous years.

Whilst 2016/17 saw only a small number of complaints being received by letter the averages detailed in the above chart show that this has been the second most preferred method of communication over previous years.

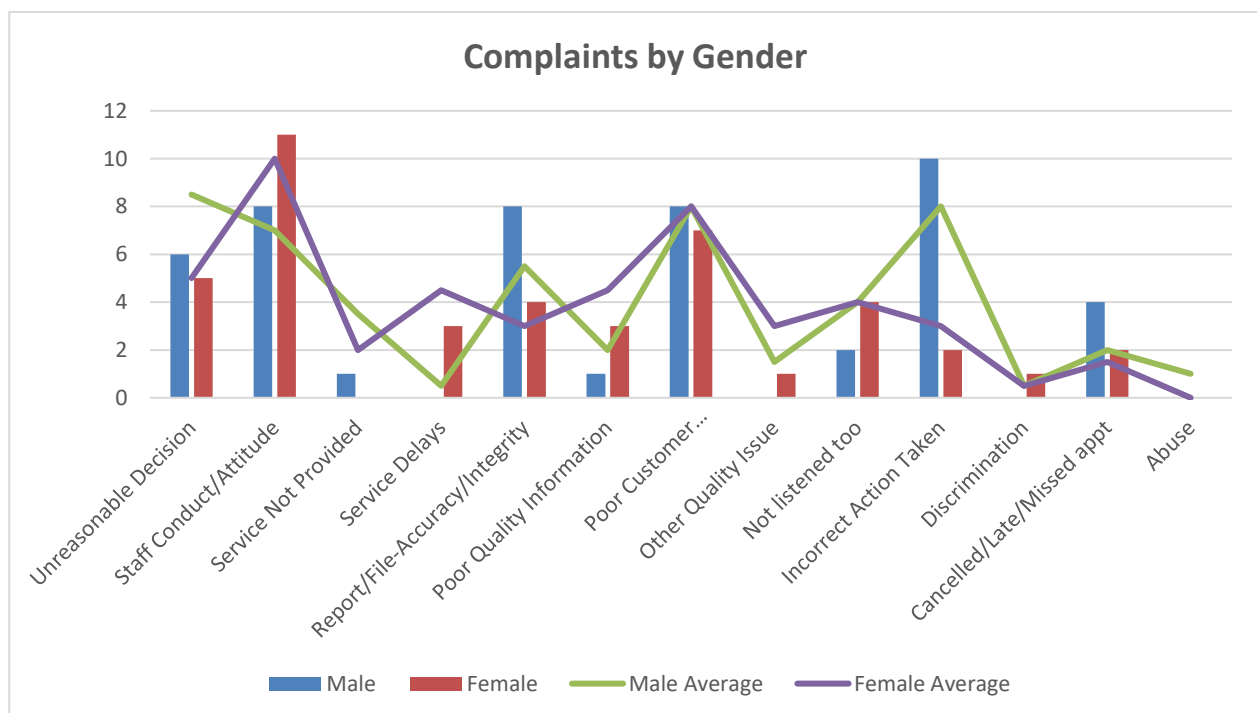
## 4.2 Social Care Complaints – Gender

In 2016/17 there were 3015 child records loaded by Children’s Social Care Services. Of those records 52% were male, 47% were female and 1% were unborn/unknown.

Of the 46 new complaints managed through the complaints procedure in 2016/17, 8 were received from young people. Of those 8 young people, 25% were male and 75% were female.

The remaining 38 complaints were raised by adults about their own experience (usually parents or carers). Of those 38 adults, 55% were male and 45% were female.

The below chart shows that the top area of complaint for males in 2016/17 was incorrect action being taken; for females, it was ‘staff conduct/attitude’.



Incorrect action being taken has consistently been the top cause for complaint for males over previous years alongside poor customer care. For females, staff conduct/attitude has consistently been the top cause for complaint over previous years.



### 4.3 Social Care Complaints – Ethnicity

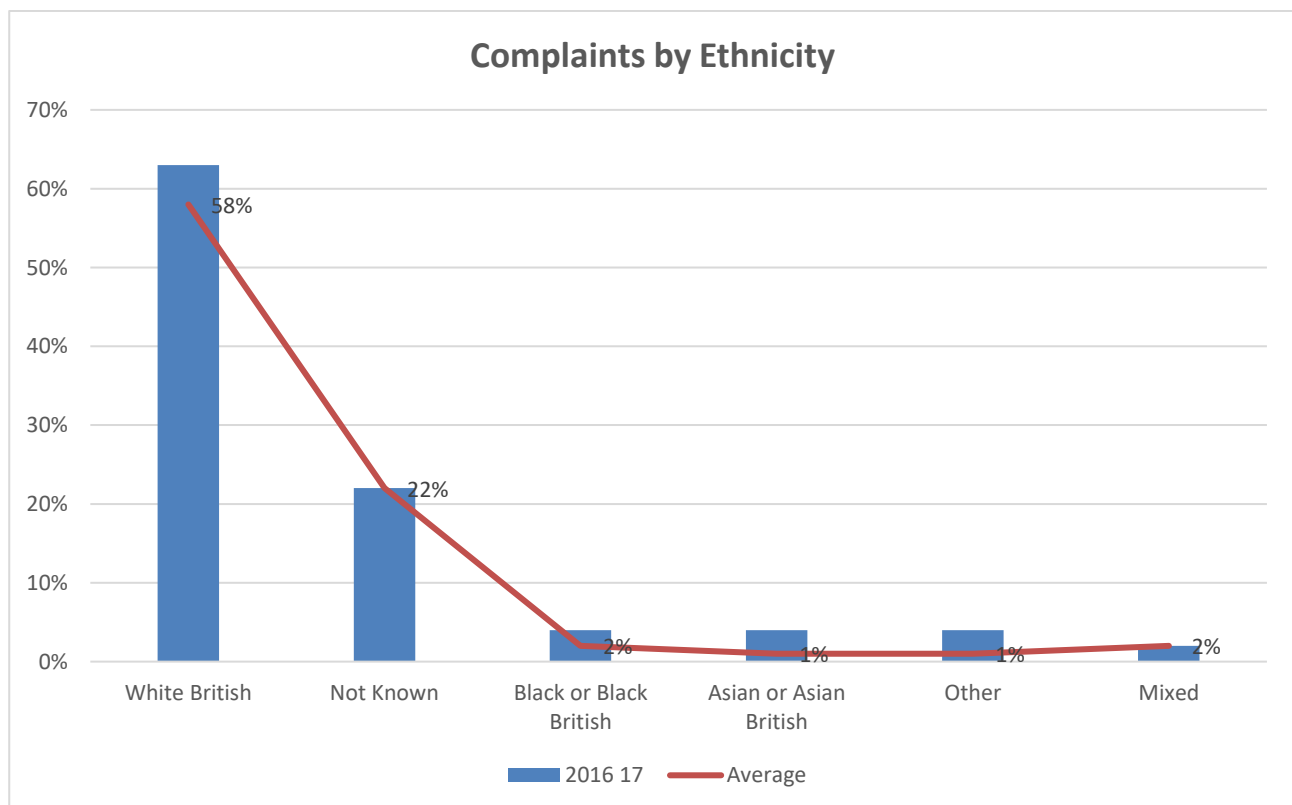
The last census on population by ethnic origin (2011) showed that 89.7% of the population in Central Bedfordshire were 'White British' and 10.3% were classified as 'Other'.

Of the 3015 child records loaded by Children's Social Care Services 81% were classified as 'White'; 8% were classified as 'Mixed'; 4% were classified as 'Black'; 2% were classified as Asian; 2% were classified as 'Other'; and the remainder were unrecorded.

The below table provides a breakdown of how ethnicity groups were represented in complaints made by young people; complaints made by adults and the total number of complaints made (young people and adults combined) during 2016/17.

Ethnicity Group	Complaints from young people (8)	Complaints from adults (38)	Total number of complaints (46)
White	11%	52%	63%
Mixed	2%	0%	2%
Black	2%	2%	4%
Other	0%	4%	4%
Asian	2%	2%	4%
Unrecorded	0%	22%	22%

Most of the complaints received in 2016/17 were raised by young people and adults who are of White ethnicity. This is to be expected as the population of Central Bedfordshire and the number of cases loaded by Children's Services are predominantly represented by those of White ethnicity.



The above chart demonstrates that 2016/17 saw a slight rise in complaints from Black; Asian and Other ethnic backgrounds compared to the average over previous years.

The issues affecting service users with a minority ethnic background were wide ranging but were similar to those raised by service users with a 'White British' background. There was no significant difference in themes.

#### 4.4 Social Care Complaints – Age

The below table provides a breakdown of how age groups were represented in respect of complaints made by young people; complaints made by adults and the total number of complaints made (young people and adults combined) during 2016/17.

Age Group	Complaints from young people (8)	Complaints from adults (38)	Total number of complaints (46)
Under 18	6.5%	0%	6.5%
18 - 21	9%	0%	9%
22 - 64	2%	76%	78%
Not Known	0%	6.5%	6.5%

The majority of complaints were made by adults affected by the actions taken by Children's Social Care Services however 8 young people did pursue their own complaints. As leaving care services can continue into early adult life, the term 'young people' refers to those still in receipt of social care services. Of the 8 complaints raised by young people, 3 were under the age of 18; 4 were between the ages of 18 and 21; and 1 was between the ages of 22 and 64.

During the course of a child or young person making a complaint, the local authority should support them by actively providing information and advice. The child or young person is entitled to advocacy support that is independent and confidential. Children's Social Care Services have made some changes this year in relation to the provision of advocacy. In previous years a Service Level Agreement was in place with the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) however this is now being facilitated 'in house' via the Family Meeting and Advocacy Service.

Of the 8 complaints made directly by young people, 4 chose to be supported by an advocate.

#### 4.5 Social Care Complaints – Disability

Of the 3015 child records loaded by Children's Social Care Services in 2016/17, 10% of service users were described as having one or more disability.

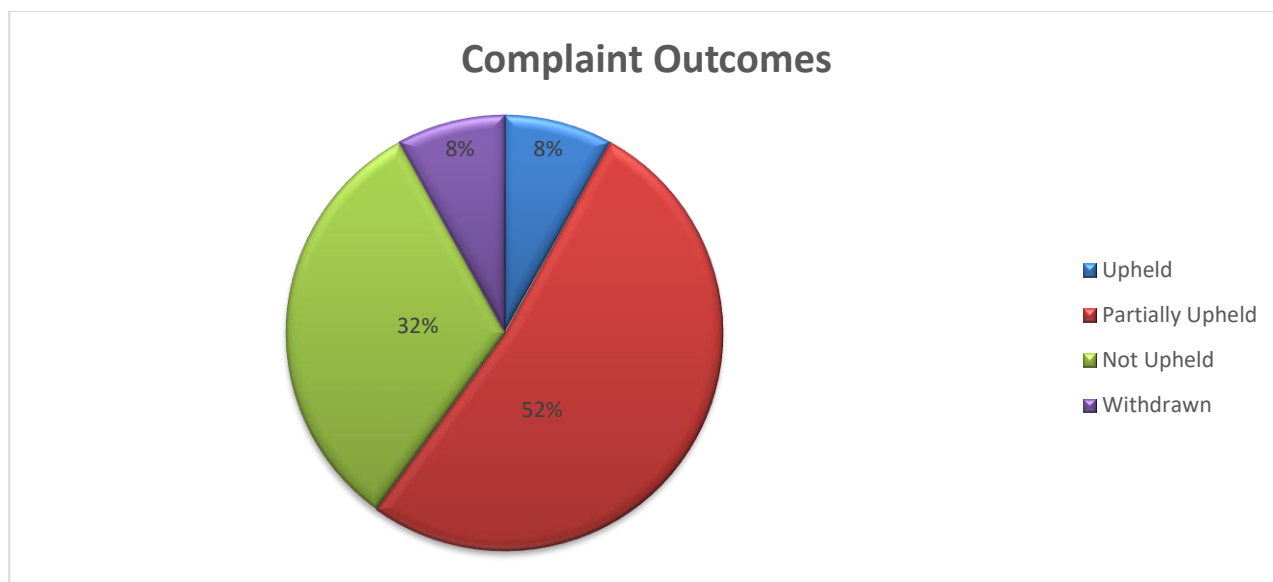
A significant proportion of complaints (98%) were recorded as 'unknown' in relation to disability of the service user. Where data was captured 2% of service users were described as having a learning disability.

There were two complaints related to the Children with Disabilities service. The issues raised were similar to those raised in other areas of social care. There was no significant difference in themes.

## 5. Outcomes from Concluded Complaints

There were 50 stage 1 complaints concluded in the period.

The below chart indicates the outcomes from complaints at stage 1 in 2016/17. 8% of complaints were upheld in full and 52% were upheld in part. In total 60% of complaints were well founded either in full or in part.



The below table indicates that the upheld rates in 2016/17 were impacted predominantly by customer care/communication issues and staff conduct/attitude.

In 2015/16 poor customer care/communication was also the top area for upheld rates. However, the second highest was unreasonable decisions which has proven to be less of a concern in 2016/17.

Types of Complaint	Upheld rates in 2016/17	Upheld rates in 2015/16
Poor Customer Care/Communication	21%	16%
Staff Conduct/Attitude	19%	12%
Incorrect Action Taken	14%	9%
Report/File/-Accuracy/Integrity	12%	7%
Unreasonable Decision	9%	16%
Cancelled/Late/Missed Appt	9%	0%
Poor Quality Information	5%	9%
Service Delays	5%	7%
Not Listened Too	2%	9%
Other Quality Issue	2%	5%
Discrimination	2%	0%
Service Not Provided	0%	7%
Quality of Care	0%	2%

## 6. Performance in Complaint Handling

### 6.1 Stage 1 Compliance

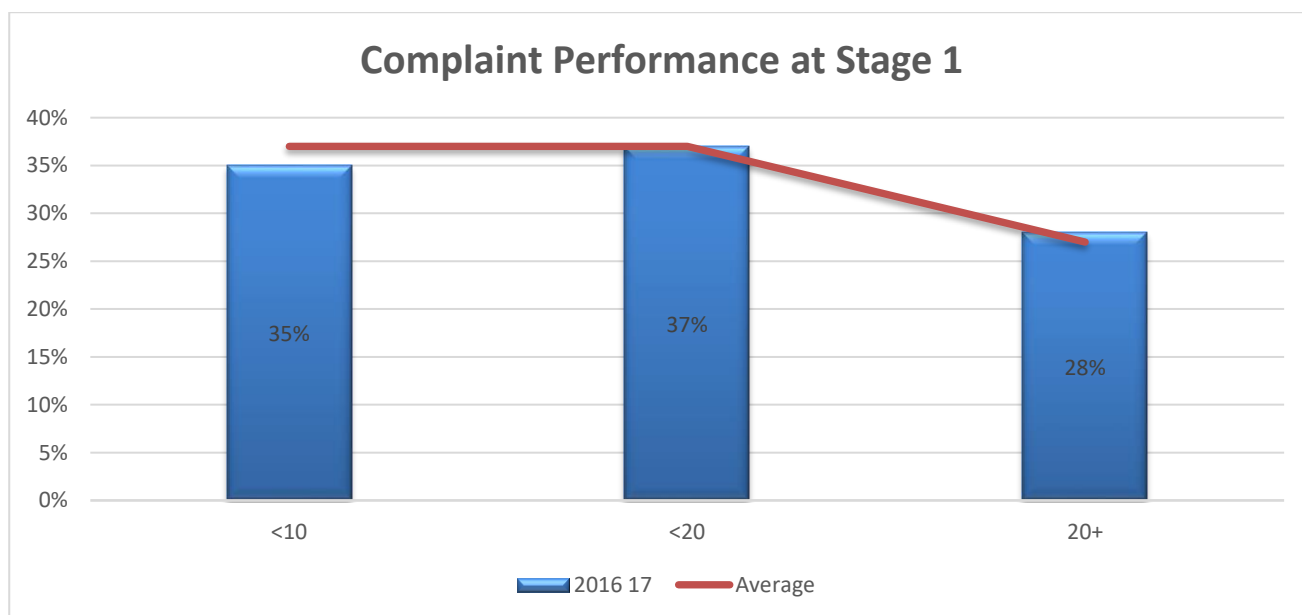
50 complaints were concluded at stage 1 in 2016/17.

The complaints procedure allows for 10 working days for completion of a stage 1 complaint with a further 10 working days for more complex complaints or additional time if an advocate is required.

Of those 50 complaints concluded at stage 1, 4 were withdrawn. Of the remaining 46 complaints:

- 16 were completed within 10 working days
- 17 were completed within 20 working days
- 13 exceeded 20 working days.

The below chart indicates the performance in handling complaints at stage 1 during 2016/17 in comparison to the average performance in handling complaints at stage 1 in previous years.



Complaint performance in 2016/17 is consistent with the average performance over previous years. However, the number of complaints that took longer than the statutory 20 working days was slightly above the average number of complaints that have exceeded 20 working days over previous years.

The below table indicates the reasons why complaints took more than 20 working days to conclude, in comparison to the previous year. Service delays and availability of key personnel were the top reasons in 2016/17 compared to complaints being detailed or complex in 2015/16.

Performance Delay Reasons	2016/17	2015/16
Service Delay	4	1

Availability of Key Personnel	4	1
Complainant's Delay	2	1
Extension agreed	2	2
Detailed/Historical/Complex	1	3
Eligibility Query	0	2

## 6.2 Complaint Escalations (Stages 2 & 3)

Where a complaint is not resolved locally at stage 1, the complainant has the right to request consideration of the complaint at stage 2. Consideration of complaints at stage 2 is normally achieved through an investigation conducted by an externally commissioned investigating officer and an independent person. Where stage 2 has been concluded and the complainant is still dissatisfied, the complainant can request further consideration of the complaint by a review panel at stage 3. On conclusion of the local authority complaints process the complainant should be advised of their right to refer the matter to the Local Government Ombudsman.

Whilst there are three stages to the complaints procedure the Customer Relations Team provides support and guidance to Children's Social Care Services to ensure responses at stage 1 are as robust as possible. Any requests for escalation under the complaints process will be assessed by the Customer Relations Team to establish whether there is merit in further investigation. Complainants do have the right to escalate however there are occasions when there is no evidence of fault or service failure; when there is no achievable or realistic remedy; and when we are no longer in dispute with the complainant. We would not usually seek to investigate those types of complaints further. This is in line with the guidance followed by the Local Government Ombudsman.

If there is merit in further investigation nothing should preclude either the complainant or the local authority from suggesting Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). There are significant cost savings by remedying cases without the need for externally commissioned investigators and the local authority should therefore explore this option. However, entering into ADR should not restrict the complainant's right to escalate their complaint.

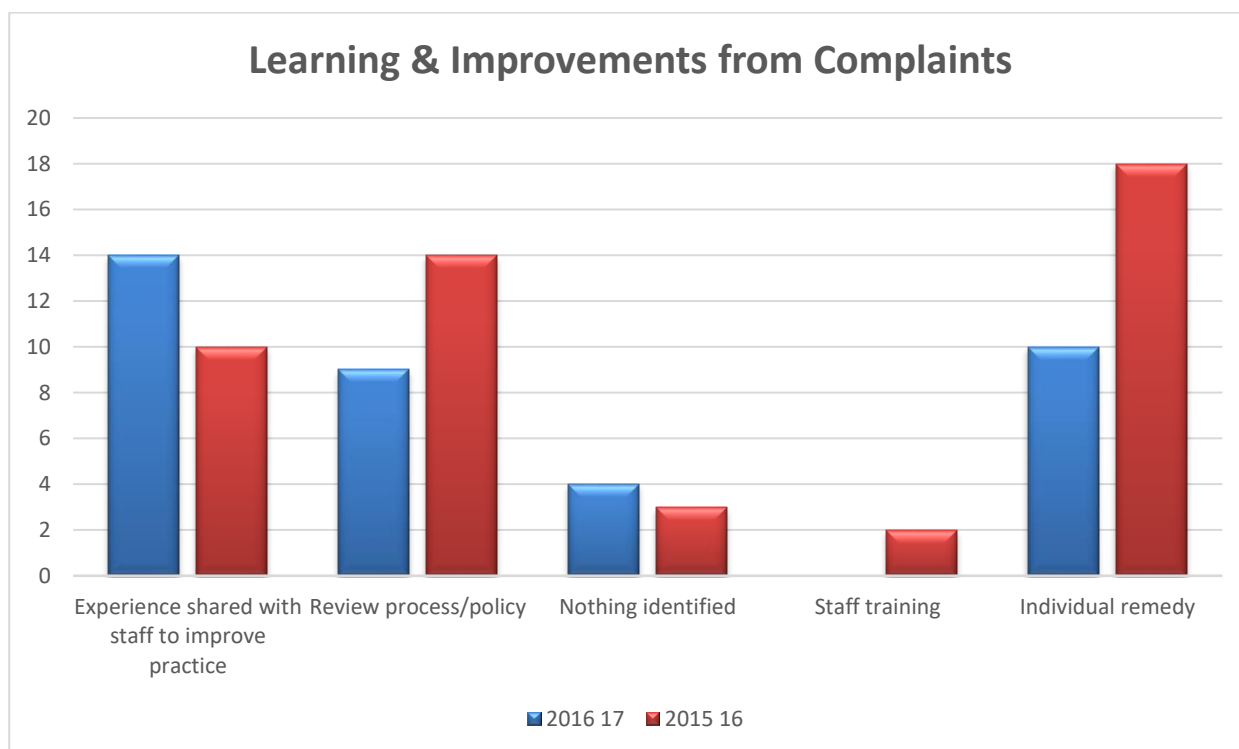
Of the 46 new complaints accepted into the process in 2016/17, 9 complainants sought to escalate their complaints. In each case Customer Relations undertook an assessment and concluded the investigation process had been exhausted. A copy of the assessment was provided to the complainants to demonstrate why the complaint would not be investigated further and they were also advised of their right to refer the matter to the Local Government Ombudsman.

As a result of the actions taken to resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity, there were no stage 2 complaint investigations or stage 3 reviews during 2016/17.

## 7. Learning and Improvements from Complaints

Where complaints are upheld either fully or in part complainants will receive an apology. However, service areas are also expected to put in place a remedy which may be for the individual complainant or undertake wider learning across the service to ensure mistakes are not repeated.

The below chart shows the types of learning identified from complaints in 2016/17 compared to those identified in 2015/16.



The above chart shows that the majority of improvements identified in 2016/17 resulted in the complainant's experience being shared with staff to improve practice. In comparison, the majority of improvements in 2015/16 resulted in individual remedies for complainants.

### Key improvements to Council services included:

- Social workers will encourage young people to meet with them at a neutral venue to discuss their wishes and feelings if a parent has concerns about an address they may be staying/spending time at.
- Staff have been reminded of the importance of checking their understanding of information provided by parents as part of an assessment and to triangulate that information with other agencies.
- Social workers have been reminded to be explicit about the reason for any visit to see a family.
- Social workers have been reminded to make attempts to contact a family to explain if they are likely to be late for an agreed appointment.
- Measures are to be put into place to prevent delays in sending meeting minutes.

- There is a lack of guidance in place for social workers around the appropriate car seat to use in relation to the weight and height of a child. This has been raised with the Head of Service to ensure this is addressed. In the interim guidance has been shared during team meetings.
- Best practice in relation to quality of reports for Initial Child Protection Conferences has been discussed with social workers. In particular, being open and transparent when writing reports and to be inclusive with families in terms of reviewing the contact before the report is finalised.
- Checks and measures to be put in place to reduce likelihood of Section 7 Reports being provided late.
- Respite allocation letters are to be amended to explain the process more clearly, specifically about any circumstances which may require the cancellation of provision.
- A review is to be undertaken to establish how details of Education Plans for Looked after Children are provided to them in Personal Education Plan format at the appropriate time.
- A more efficient and robust service needs to be provided to prospective adoptive parents by ensuring prompt follow up to their enquiries
- Review what actions can be taken to ensure young people and their families still receive a good level of service when a social worker is on leave or absent from work.
- Reports distributed on behalf of a social worker should be agreed with the Team Manager to ensure that the correct version is sent.

## 8. Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) Complaints

### 6.1 Complaints Received and Decision Notices

The LGO annual statistics show that they received 16,863 complaints and enquiries about local authorities in 2016/17. In comparison, the LGO considered six complaints about Central Bedfordshire Council's Children's Social Care Services during this period. The table below sets out the complaints received and any Ombudsman decisions reached:

Complaint	Ombudsman Decision
The complainant says the Council has failed to give him copies of information it holds about him and his partner under their former names. The complainant says he needs the information to obtain the return of the children, who are in care as ordered by a court. The complainant also complained about the underlying care proceedings	The Ombudsman will not investigate this complaint about the Council failing to give him access to information because it would be reasonable for him to approach the Information Commissioner. She will not investigate his complaint about his children being taken into care because she cannot investigate what happened in court, and it would be reasonable for the complainant to apply to the court to try and secure the return of the children to his and his partner's care.
The complainant says that two years ago the Council changed his letter box contact with his daughter, who has been adopted, from twice a year to only once. He says the Council should not have done so as the frequency of contact was a court decision	The Ombudsman will not investigate this complaint about the reduction in the frequency of letter box contact for the complainant with his daughter. This is because there is no fault in the actions of the Council.
The complainant complains that the Council has failed to draw up a plan to allow his children, who live abroad, to visit their family in England and that an assessment commissioned by the Council is inadequate	The Ombudsman will not investigate the complaint that the Council has failed to draw up a plan to allow his children to return to England to visit their relatives. The Council is working on a plan and an investigation would not achieve anything further. Neither will the Ombudsman investigate concerns about a psychologist's assessment. The Ombudsman could not question the psychologist's professional judgement.
The complainant says that the Council wishes to impose restrictions on the length and nature of his children's visits to the country	The complainant complains about the conditions the Council is seeking to impose on his contact with his children should they return to this country from abroad. An investigation by the Ombudsman could not provide the outcome the complainant seeks which is fewer limits on his contact.
Complaint regarding the care package for a child, the funding of that care package and the handling of their complaint from January 2015 onwards	Pending Ombudsman Outcome
The complainant states that the assessment	Pending Ombudsman Outcome



team social worker failed to carry out a child and family assessment properly; the social worker failed to communicate effectively and did not properly consider the views of the parents when carrying out the assessment; the social worker acted insensitively during a home visit which took place in February 2015; the social worker failed to share relevant information at the Initial Child Protect Conference; children's social care made a flawed decision when refusing the parents' request to reallocate the assessment to another social worker

Three LGO cases reported as received in the previous year (2015/16) received decision notices in this period.

- The Ombudsman found no fault by a Council or Clinical Commissioning Group in the case of planning or commissioning decisions for a child suffering with chronic fatigue syndrome. Further, the Ombudsman found no fault in the way the Council or Clinical Commissioning Group dealt with safeguarding concerns about the parents.
- The Council failed to provide suitable services to the complainant and her son. The PLO process was unnecessary and caused avoidable distress. The Council were asked to reimburse the cost of counselling to the complainant (£500). In addition, there has been an injustice as a result of the faults which compounded a difficult family situation and caused avoidable distress. The Council were asked to pay £750 in recognition of this and to apologise to in writing.
- There was fault by the Council when it did not refer the complainant to the local safeguarding board, in not putting his views to the first children in need meeting and not sending him a copy of the minutes. The Council has apologised for those faults and that is a sufficient remedy.

## **9. Monitoring and Quality Assurance**

### **9.1 Effectiveness of Complaints Handling**

Service users, their representatives and people affected by the actions of Children's Social Care services can access the Council's complaints procedure and the Local Government Ombudsman.

The Customer Relations Team monitors the operation and effectiveness of the complaints procedure as well as how information about complaints is being used to improve services and delivery.

Stage 1 of the complaints procedure has generally been an effective means of dealing with complaints during 2016/17 with there being no escalations to stage 2 or stage 3.

Six complaints were under consideration by the Local Government Ombudsman this year. The Ombudsman decided not to investigate in four of those cases as it was satisfied that the local authority had addressed those complaints appropriately. The remaining two cases progressed to investigation by the Ombudsman. Both cases were pending a decision at the end of the period.

Complaints were seen as important feedback and a means of identifying how practices may be changed for the better. The customer experience in complaints has led to some improvements to practice. Last year we reported that there was room for improvement in understanding the root cause for complaints at a local level to fully identify learning opportunities. Customer Relations continues to support services to improve in this area.

### **9.2 Financial Implications**

There are a number of ways in which the local authority can incur costs as part of the statutory complaints process for Children's Social Care Services.

Stage 2 is normally achieved through an investigation conducted by an investigating officer and an independent person. The investigating officer may be employed by the local authority or be externally commissioned. The investigating officer however cannot be in direct line management of the service complained about. Due to the nature of the complaints that tend to escalate to stage 2 the usual practice is to externally commission an investigating officer specifically for that piece of work. The independent person however must not be an employee of the local authority and is therefore externally commissioned.

Stage 3 requires the local authority to arrange a panel hearing which must consist of three independent people, which means they cannot be employees of the local authority. This requires the panel members to be externally commissioned.

In addition, there may be rare occasions where financial redress is offered through the complaints procedure. This can be through local settlement following investigation by the Local Government Ombudsman but can also be recommended during the local authority three stage process.

Any financial costs incurred are the responsibility of Children's Social Care Services. In order to assist in minimising the risk of costs the Customer Relations Team is actively involved in quality assuring stage 1 responses to reduce escalation, proactive in offering alternative dispute resolution where appropriate and consistent in assessing whether complainants are eligible to use the statutory complaints procedure.

The below table details the total costs incurred during 2016/17:

Reasons for Cost	2016/17 Spend
Stage 2	£0.00
Stage 3	£0.00
Financial Redress	£1250 (LGO recommendation)

## 10. Customer Relations Team – Supporting Children’s Social Care

The Customer Relations Team supports Children’s Social Care Services by:

- ✓ Providing guidance, advice and support to staff on the management of complaints
- ✓ Supporting staff involved in all stages of the complaints procedure
- ✓ Quality assurance of complaint responses
- ✓ Managing challenges to complaint handling and responses
- ✓ Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman
- ✓ Overseeing the arrangements for communicating and publicising the complaints procedure
- ✓ Evaluating and reporting on the numbers, types, outcomes and trends of complaints to inform practice, development and service planning
- ✓ Providing a means to capture the learning from complaints to contribute to practice development, commissioning and service planning

During 2016/17 the Customer Relations Team will focus on a number of initiatives:

- Continue to ensure the complaints procedure is accessible, particularly to young people
- Continue to promote the Customer Relations root-cause analysis tool to help managers with identifying systemic improvements
- Continue to promote the Customer Relations toolkit for handling persistent customers consistently and fairly
- Continue to ensure complaints are handled responsively promoting alternative dispute resolution where appropriate
- Work collaboratively with colleagues to achieve a reduction in levels of complaints upheld
- Maintain the low levels of complaint investigations by the Local Government Ombudsman and where the LGO finds fault
- Improve capture of equality and diversity information
- Undertake a project to move the admin function of the Customer Relations Team into the Customer Service Centre. This will provide the Customer Relations Team with some much-needed capacity to focus on promoting good complaints handling across the Council



**A great place to live and work**

**Contact us...**

by telephone: 0300 300 4995

by email: [Customer.Relations@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Customer.Relations@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

on the web: [www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Write to Central Bedfordshire Council, Priory House,  
Monks Walk, Chicksands, Shefford, Bedfordshire SG17 5TQ