



Statutory Childrens Social Care Annual Report

Complaints and Customer Feedback

For the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024



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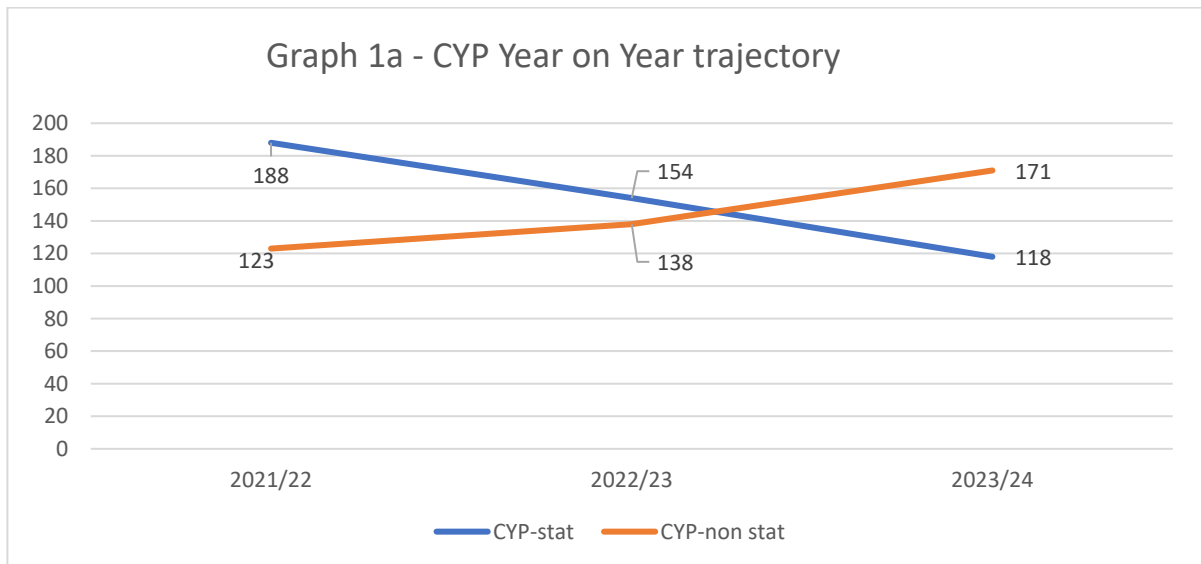
1. Executive Summary

Complaints and feedback are used to better understand the needs of our customers and offer an opportunity to learn and improve. As a direct result of complaints in 2023/24 we have improved communication with families, made changes to policy and processes and staff and managers have attended specific training sessions. Many complaints can be avoided by providing regular communication and by being empathetic, clear, factual, and honest in our interactions, as well as doing what we say we will do.

Only 1% of active CSC cases resulted in a complaint being made. Most complaints are made by parents or guardians. Only 21 complaints (18%) were made directly by children.

Graph 1a below shows:

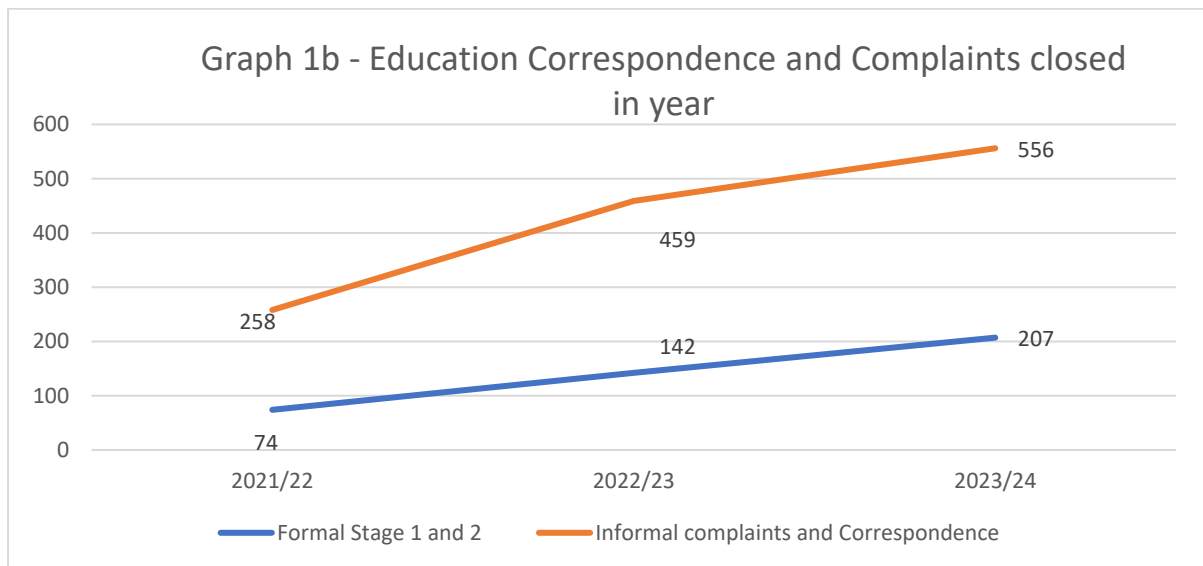
- Statutory children's social care (CSC) complaints by children and those with parental responsibility, decreased by 23% from 154 in 2022/23 to 118 in 2023/24.
- Non statutory children's social care complaints (people without parental responsibility) went up from 138 to 171, an increase of 24%.



Graph 1b overleaf shows:

- Corporate formal complaints about children with special educational needs and education matters went up by 46% from 142 to 207.
- Corporate informal complaints about children with special educational needs and education matters and associated correspondence, went up from 459 to 556, an increase of 21%.





Children and Education complaints are now the most common reason for people to approach the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (the Ombudsman) accounting for half of all referrals, and this trend is reflected in Lancashire.

Over the past decade the number of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP's) have more than doubled nationally and the supply of specialist placements is vastly outstripped by the number of families whose child is assessed as needing one. The [Ombudsman](#) and the [ISOS Partnership / Local Government Association](#) also acknowledge the current recruitment difficulties and national shortage of Educational Psychologists. All agree that that a reform of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system is essential and unavoidable. In response to the situation and increase in demands, the service has adopted a recovery plan, and complaints have been targeted as an area of focused improvement.

Compliments have broadly stayed the same in number as 2022/23, with the most complimented teams being the Inclusion service and Fostering and Adoption.

The total amount spent on external independent investigations for children's complaints was £9682.60 (a reduction of £1,953.30 on 2022/23 costs. A total of £30,344.53 was paid out in Ombudsman children's final decisions for 2023/24.

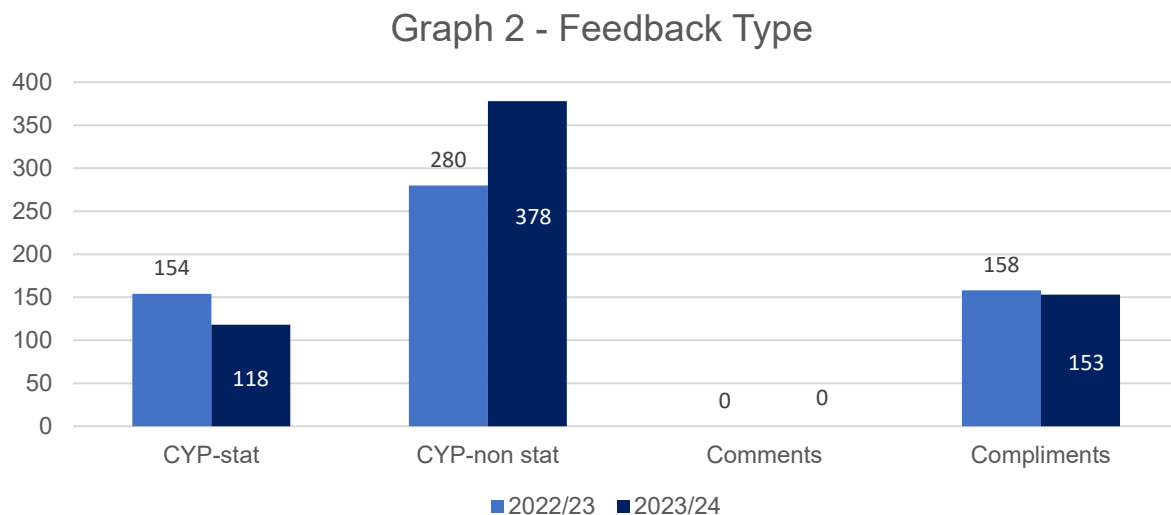


2 Background

There is a statutory and non-statutory procedure for complaints about children's and young people's services. The statutory process involves 3 stages for social care complainants, who are eligible to complain. The Stage 1 initial response is always compiled by the service manager involved. If the person complaining is still unhappy, they can request a Stage 2 independent investigation. If the complainant remains unhappy, a Stage 3 review panel, which considers the way the stage 2 was investigated, can be requested. The non-statutory process applies to non-social care complaints (for example education or SEND) or for people complaining about CSC who do not have parental responsibility for a child (for example grandparents). In 2023/24 the total amount spent on external independent investigations for children's complaints was £9682.60 which is a decrease in costs from the previous year.

Graph 2 shows a welcome decrease in closed CSC statutory complaints. Complaints specifically decreased by 23%, to make an overall total of 118 for 2023/24. The decrease in complaints is probably because of more direct and open work between families and social care and consequently there are improved working practices.

Most CSC complaints are made by parents or guardians. Only 21 complaints were made directly by children in 2023/24 (18%). Complaints made by children are prioritised for immediate attention and advocates are provided to help give children a voice.



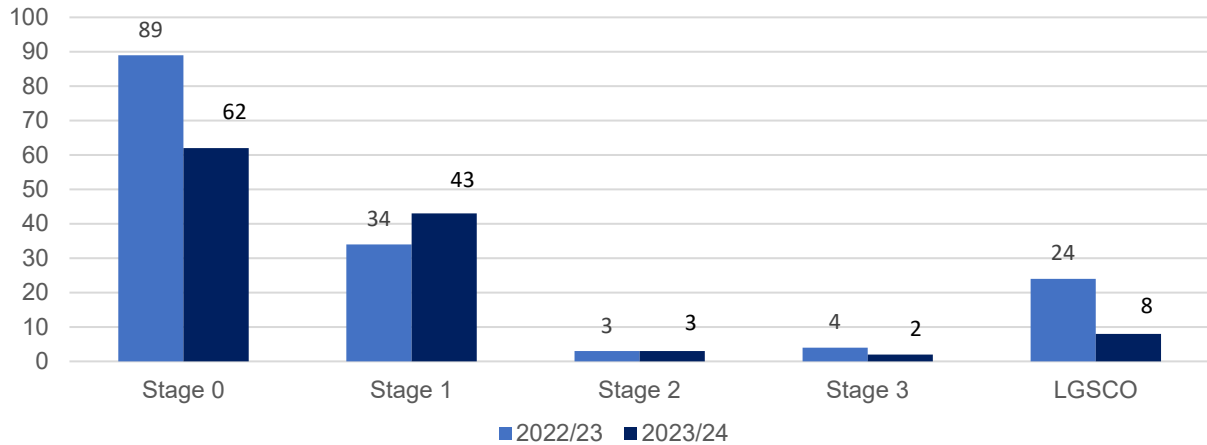
2.1 Breakdown of complaints by stage

The breakdown of complaints with outcomes recorded against them can be seen in Graph 3. Stage 0 is the early resolution of complaints.



The main difference between 2023/24 and 2022/23 has been a welcome significant decrease of 66% in LGSCO final decisions for statutory social care complaints and a decrease in early resolutions (Stage 0).

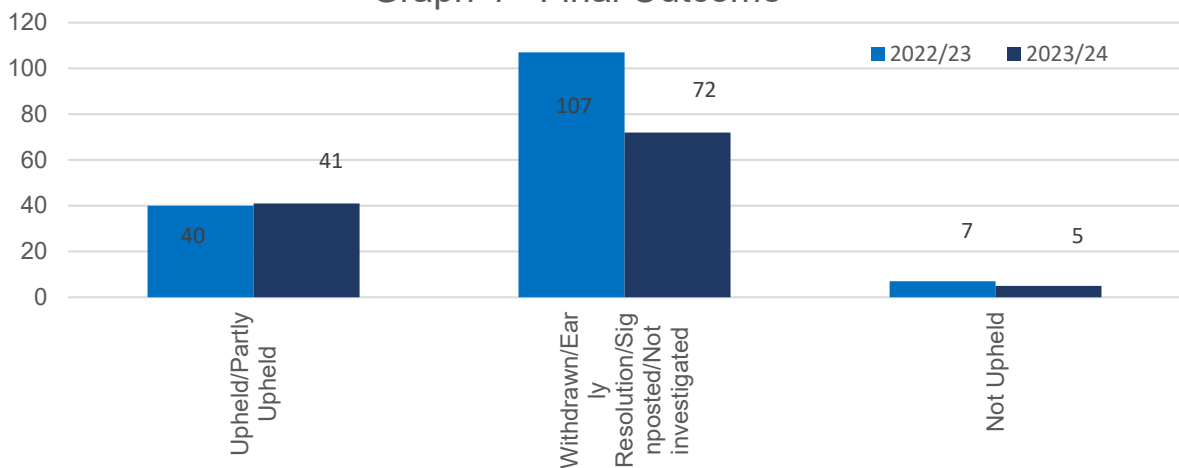
Graph 3 - Complaint Stage



2.2 Breakdown of complaints by outcome

Graph 4 shows a breakdown of the 118 closed statutory complaints which had a final outcome recorded at the time of writing this report. Of these 5% were not upheld, 26% were upheld or partly upheld and most complaints (69%) were signposted, resolved early or withdrawn.

Graph 4 - Final Outcome



Of the total number of both statutory & non-statutory CSC complaints received, 195 exceeded statutory timescales at Stages 0 to 2 (20 working days) which is a rate of 52%. In 2022/23, this was a total of 111 and a rate of 72%. Improvements have been made to the recording system, to be able to close the record immediately after a response has been issued and then re-open it again if the complainant remains dissatisfied and wishes the complaint to be escalated to the next stage. This has

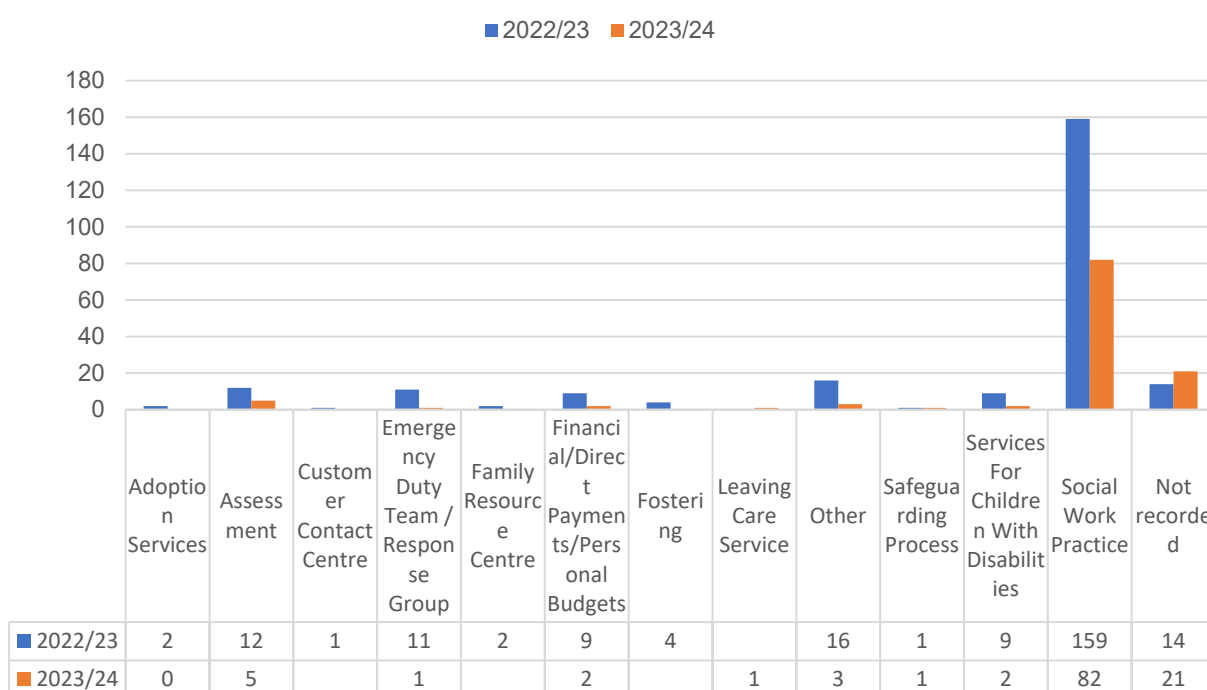


improved response times, but much work remains to be done by teams to respond to complaints within acceptable timescales.

2.3 What do people complain about in the statutory process?

Graph 5 shows a breakdown by service type for the last 2 financial years. The proportions are similar and social work practice continues to be the most frequent subject of complaint covering 69% of all statutory CYP complaints.

Graph 5 - Complaints By Service Type



The main reason for a complaint is social work practice. This includes staff not communicating well with families, the transitions process, not working in joined up ways with internal colleagues and external organisations.

2.4 Case Studies

Three examples of case studies are outlined in Appendix 1.

- A complaint by a young person supported by a foster carer.
- a corporate complaint by a parent.
- a statutory complaint by a parent.

3 Summary of non-statutory complaints

Non-CSC statutory social care complaints are made by a people who are **not** entitled to complain under the Children Act procedures (for example a family friend or a relative without parental responsibility) or if the complaint is about something that cannot be

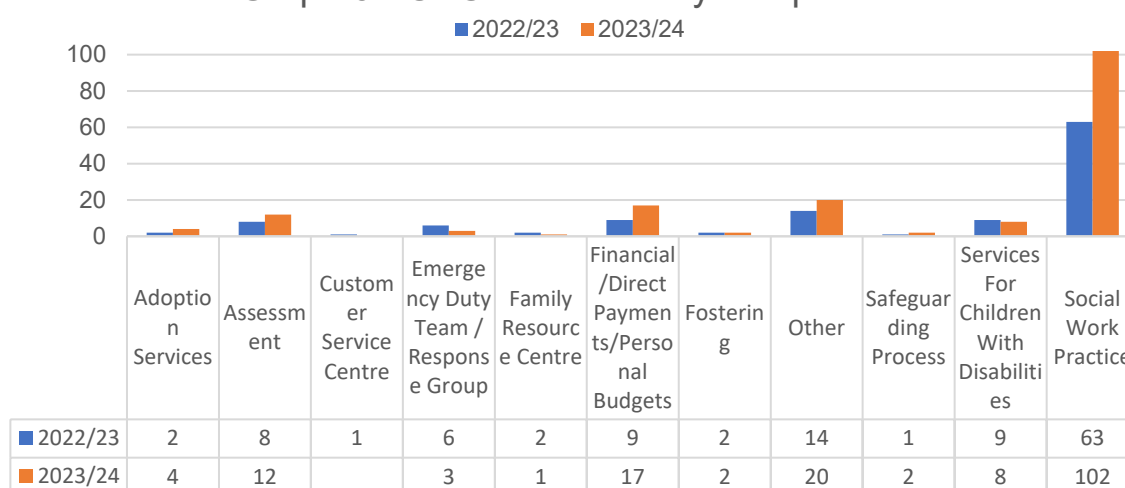


complained about under the Children Act (for example adoption or fostering matters/complaints by members of the public: please see further categories below). Complaints about the Inclusion Service are also non-statutory if CSC is not involved.

3.1 What are non-statutory social care complaints about?

Non statutory complaints have increased from 138 in 22/23 to 171 in 23/24. The main theme is social work practice.

Graph 6 - CSC non statutory complaints



3.2 Summary of Inclusion Service complaints and correspondence

Non statutory, inclusion service formal complaints follow the Corporate Complaints Procedure. They are made mainly by parents complaining on behalf of their child who have or want an Educational Health and Care Plan. National pressures are currently at unprecedented levels. Formal inclusion complaints went up by 46% from 142 to 207 overall, with 171 Stage 1's and 36 Stage 2 complaints.

Parents and guardians complain of the following issues:

- not carrying out education, health and care (EHC) plan assessments for children and young people within the statutory timescales,
- not identifying appropriate educational provision for pupils with EHC plans
- not overseeing admissions to special schools, mainstream schools and nurseries for students with EHC plans
- not annually reviewing EHC plans

Associated with these rises, informal complaints and correspondence for inclusion went up from 459 to 556, an increase of 21%.

Senior managers are informed of the themes and learning on a regular basis through



quarterly reporting and the compliance and assurance board.

3.3 Learning and Improving

The main theme of statutory complaints is the need to improve partnership working between families and the social care teams. Although individual staff and managers have addressed failures in specific situations, improvements remain to be implemented. Timescales for complaint responses also need to be improved.

We will continue to embed the strategic lessons of all complaints into everyday practice. This means acting promptly when things go wrong and owning the recommendations in reports produced by the Ombudsman to deliver improvements in how we work, to ensure that the same mistakes are not repeated.

In response to learning from complaints and customer feedback in 2023/24 the children's social care service will:

- work more proactively with the complaints team to enable complaints to be sent to the right place first time.
- work with the learning and development team and the Principal Social Worker to strengthen training around having difficult conversations respectfully as most complaints are linked to communication.

Heads of Service will also be copied into stage 1 complaints on allocation.

Team managers will also share the main findings of the complaints reports in teams and hold conversations around what good communication looks like in various circumstances.

In response to increasing complaints about children with special educational needs, the Childrens and Education Team has introduced a plan for improvement. Additional resources have also been allocated to respond to complaints in a more timely matter.

We are currently:

- Exploring the creation of more state funded secondary schools to include special educational mental health provision,
- Increasing our staffing capacity to meet increasing demands for Education Health and Care Needs assessments and reviewing them every year,
- Reviewing the range and accessibility of post-16 education opportunities in Lancashire.

Additionally, a Helpline run by experienced staff has also been introduced and expanded to improve communication with families. The corporate complaints team will also be receiving additional officer capacity towards the end of 2024, to improve the customer experience in responding, investigating, and remedying SEND and other corporate complaints and making improvements when things go wrong.

Additionally, a new digital system is being developed with the aim of joining up council administration processes and improving complaint handling and efficiency in a cross-department initiative. This will also support the council to respond to the demands and expectations of the new Complaint Handling Code published by the Local Government



and Social Care Ombudsman. The Code's reduced timescales for responding at Stage 1 will greatly impact on non-statutory children's complaints, amongst other council functions, so a business case is being prepared to assist with preparations. This will be considered by the Compliance and Assurance Board to support compliance with the new Code.

Please see Appendix 2 for details of learning from specific individual complaints, upheld by managers.

4. Compliments

153 compliments were received for CSC in 2023/24. A similar number of compliments were received in 2022/23 (158). This includes 81 compliments which for the Inclusion Service, which is an increase on the number for the previous year (61).

4.1 Themes

The Inclusion Service and fostering and adoption were the most frequent complimented areas.

The themes are:

- Open Days held by Fostering and Adoption,
- Staff doing as they say they will do,
- Staff working in joined up ways with external organisations such as schools, health services and internally,
- Staff working in joined up ways with other services in the council,
- Staff being prepared to go the extra mile, being caring and kind,
- Time appropriate interventions; and,
- Staff knowledge, values and ethics.

4.2 Word Cloud

Please see Appendix 3 for examples of compliments made. The word cloud below is taken from the compliments included on pages 17 and 18.

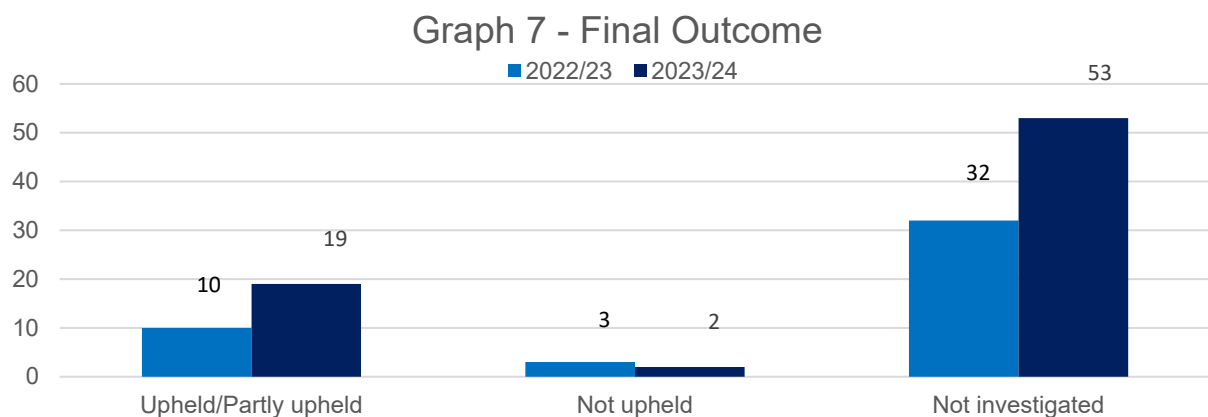


5. Ombudsman Complaints

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman acts as the regulator and provides the final stage for complaints about local authorities and some other organisations providing local public services. Their service is provided free of charge. Complainants approach the Ombudsman when all other options for pursuing their complaint are closed, after a proportionate response has been provided. The Ombudsman will only consider complaints that have already been through the council complaints procedures. Sometimes the council will make early referrals to the Ombudsman when complainants continue to be dissatisfied and the council considers that it has not done anything wrong, or it has done all it can to resolve the matter.

In 2023/24 the Ombudsman received a total of 87 separate enquiries in relation to CSC, Inclusion and Education Services (including school appeals) in Lancashire (in 2022/23 it was 61). A total of 74 decisions were made by the Ombudsman for these services.

Graph 7 below shows of the 74 Ombudsman CSC decisions received in 2023/24, 39% were either not upheld or closed after initial enquiries. The number of enquiries referred back to the council for local resolution represent 35%. Only 26% of decisions were upheld.



The Ombudsman will also uphold complaints that the council has already upheld, and of the 19 complaints, 8 had already been partly upheld.

Please see Appendix 1b for Ombudsman identified learning.

A total of £30,344.53 was paid out in final decisions for 2023/24. In 2022/23 it was £8,000.

There were no public reports in relation to children and young people in 2023/24.



Appendix 1: Case Studies

Case Study 1	Complaint from a Young Person supported by Foster Carer.
Complaint Summary	L raised a number of concerns within their complaint which included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the social worker does not answer their mothers' calls; • L struggles to communicate with their social worker; and • The social worker has cancelled visits.
Complaint Outcome	A meeting was held with L and their Foster Carer: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an apology was provided to L; • the social worker maintains regular visits with minimal disruption; • the social worker will answer L's mother's calls and make contact at least once a week; and • the social worker will speak more slowly and clearly in the future.

Case Study 2	Corporate Complaint from a Grandparent.
Complaint Summary	H raised the following concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how the Special Guardianship (SG) Allowance was calculated; • failure to return calls in a timely manner; and • inadequate explanation of future support for the Grandchild.
Complaint Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an apology for the calls not being returned was provided and an explanation of why this occurred; • a meeting was held to explain the full breakdown of the allowance and how the final payment was formulated; • additional support and advice was provided from social care; and • H was signposted to other agencies who can provide financial assistance on non-social care elements.

Case Study 3	Statutory Complaint from a Parent.
Complaint Summary	P raised a complaint about the following concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P does not trust social care; • Communication is very poor; • P is not kept informed of meeting dates; and • An unannounced visit was made to the property which caused distress to the family.

Complaint Outcome	As a result of this complaint the following action was taken: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• an apology was provided in relation to the poor communication and distress caused;• an explanation of the unannounced visit was provided;• meeting dates will be provided in advance of future meetings; and• Other assurances were provided in terms of support and advice from the social care team.
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Appendix 2(a): Details of Learning

Area	Internal learning point for children's services
Improving relationships with families	<p>The largest learning area identified in this financial year involved the standard of partnership working between the social worker and the families, learning from complaints involved the following actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services will ensure that communication between teams/workers improves when there are staff absences & pending/ongoing assessments so delays can be avoided. • The social worker and wider team will be made aware to include children in the assessment process right from the start. • A complaint case was discussed within a team meeting to ensure staff are aware of how their presence in family homes can be perceived as well as ensuring clear & consistent communication is always in place. • One customer was re-assured that the concerns raised would be explored with the social worker with a reflective discussion of how to develop future practice. • A person-centred approach is now adopted, where the child's voice is at the centre of involvement, and this will be the focus of further discussions with the worker.
Reflection, training, and improvements to social care provision	<p>Complaints provide services with the opportunity to reflect on outcomes to inform training and development sessions with staff, either in supervision or formal training sessions to improve service delivery to families.</p> <p>A number of complaints identified further training and development needs through one-to-one reflective supervision sessions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social work teams will all undertake training in respect of completion of placement requests - pertinent information to share, recording & the level of detail. • An extra additional layer of social work scrutiny considers further concerns raised. • Further training was provided to one team to ensure all staff are aware of how to send invitations on Teams without sharing email addresses.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social workers have undertaken data protection training so that they are aware of the procedure in relation to sharing personal details. • One service re-assured a family that full handovers will be undertaken when cases are transferred to new workers. • In another case the Senior Manager for Family Safeguarding shared the complaint details with another relevant team to ensure improved partnership working.
<p>Communication</p>	<p>Communication is often at the centre of many complaints. All complaints resulted in further discussions being held with the workers within one-to-one reflective supervision sessions to identify improvements to communication between services and families. Specific aspects include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of discussions took place between managers and relevant social workers and their teams on the subject of communication. Apologies were provided in relation to the failure to return phone calls and the importance of returning calls from families in a timely manner. • In another number of cases, further contact was made with families to improve communication and develop a better working relationship. • In one case a development session was held to discuss the language used by a social worker with the family and explore how this could be improved.
<p>Reviewing and improving processes, policies, and procedures</p>	<p>A number of complaints identified organisational learning opportunities to several policies and procedures. Specific improvements include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A full review of the adoption allowance process to ensure delays do not happen in future. • Updated guidance has been produced around seeking consent from families. • A working group was established to review SGO finances. • Staff have been briefed and trained on communication relating to social care subject matters, to improve service delivery and to avoid the same mistakes happening again. • Team managers have been reminded of their role in the financial approval process and the need to ensure workers are following the correct process.



Appendix 2(b): Ombudsman identified learning.

The main learning from upheld social care and education complaints is as follows:

SEND managers held training for all SEND staff, delivered by a teacher of the deaf, following a complaint where reasonable adjustments during the EHC process were not considered. They have also developed an action plan of how we intend to provide accessible information and reasonable adjustments to the deaf community going forward.

A complaint about our failure to issue an EHCP and then to deliver provisions set out in it resulted in SEND managers reviewing our EHC plan annual review procedure to ensure it followed statutory timescales set out in the SEND regulations. Additionally, they reviewed how we ensure children/young adults with EOTAS receive their provision and provided staff training to ensure they understand the legal framework and obligations in relation to these failures.

We did not follow the statutory children’s complaint process when we considered a complaint about support from the Children with Disabilities Team being declined. We have reminded staff members who consider statutory complaints about children’s social care services to make sure they are dealt with through the statutory procedure regardless of which team is involved. Staff were also reminded of the timescales set out in the statutory guidance, specifically in relation to providing a final response.

We did not award home to school transport funding and we had to ensure all members of our school transport appeal panels were aware of the Dudley test, and that we provide evidence of the cost comparison when our panel considers appeals where 2 schools are named in section I in a child’s EHC plan.



Appendix 3: Compliment examples

Children's Social Care

"Between August and September when we were transferring from Wigan to Lancashire we had 12 social workers, my son has additional needs and I never thought he would develop a relationship with someone but he did, F managed this.

She has supported my confidence and self-esteem and she has built my strength up as a person. I have had experiences with social workers in the past and she has changed my perception. F is really good at her job.

F went above and beyond, she was superwoman. She became part of the family, she was really nice, she was loving, I was never offended by her, I am sad that I am going to get a new social worker in Southport. I think she is brilliant and really, good at her job. It is a shame that we have had to move out of Lancashire, but there was nothing else that could be done. Tell her thank you from me, we are all going to be really sad when we have to say bye".

"I would personally like to thank you for the time we have worked together to support the Jxx family.

From the beginning, you have been an absolute breath of fresh air and nothing has been too much trouble.

Your dedication and commitment to promoting good outcomes and ensuring that SJ wishes and feelings are captured too is lovely to see. The relationship you have built with the family is a true reflection off all your hard work, even when SJ struggled to engage you were committed to breaking down that barrier and overcoming hurdles with ease to help all professionals involved.

Your passion for co – production echoes in your delivery of support and it's been a wonderful experience working alongside you.

It has been a pleasure learning new working styles, bridging the gap with housing and sharing best practice with you."

SEND

"Good evening, I just wanted to email to compliment a member of your team. After experiencing a rather unpleasant phone call earlier in the week, I was absolutely overwhelmed by the kindness and helpfulness of the lady I spoke with today. She was incredibly helpful and supportive. Her advice helped me tremendously and I wanted to let you know. Her name was SA and she works for SEND IASS. Please could you pass this onto her manager. I am incredibly grateful".



Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

"I would like to email to pass my compliments on the service and support that I received when telephoning the MASH team. I spoke with MASH social worker JS and found him to be very helpful and professional throughout the interaction, and supportive of my concerns. This resulted in a good outcome for the child and she consented to a referral for support herself, and without his knowledge and guidance I wouldn't have known that this was possible (parents were not engaging with support). He was polite and timely in telephoning me back".

