Lancashire County Council

# Annual Statutory Report for Childrens and Education Services

## Complaints and Customer Feedback

For the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026

## Contents

**1.0 Executive Summary** ..... 3
**2.0 Background** ..... 3
**3.0 Children's Social Care** ..... 4
**3.1 Statutory Complaints** ..... 5
3.1.1 Statutory Complaints by Outcome ..... 6
3.1.2 Statutory Complaints by Service Group ..... 6
**3.2 Non-Statutory Complaints** ..... 7
3.2.1 Non-Statutory Complaints by Outcome ..... 7
3.2.2 Non-Statutory Complaints by Service Group ..... 8
**4.0 What do people complain about in the statutory and non-statutory process?** ..... 8
**5.0 Breached Complaints** ..... 9
**6.0 Compliments** ..... 9
**7.0 Thematic Learning** ..... 10
**8.0 Children's Social Care Improvements** ..... 11
**9.0 Special Educational Needs Service (SEND)** ..... 13
9.1 SEND Statistics ..... 13
9.2 SEND complaint themes. ..... 14
9.4 SEND improvements ..... 15
**10.0 Ombudsman Complaints** ..... 15
10.1 Learning from Ombudsman complaints ..... 16
10.2. Ombudsman Financial Remedies ..... 17

Appendix 1: Compliment Themes for Children's Social Care ..... 18
Appendix 2: Outstanding Compliments ..... 19
Appendix 3: You said we did… ..... 20

## 1.0 Executive Summary

Complaints and feedback continue to provide valuable insight into the experiences of children, young people and families, informing service improvement across Children's Social Care (CSC) and Education.

During 2025/26, 324 CSC complaints were closed, an increase from 305 in 2024/25, reflecting rising demand and expectations. Despite this, only 1% of active cases resulted in a complaint, with just seven complaints submitted by children themselves. Most complaints were resolved locally, demonstrating a strong commitment to early resolution and accountability. Key themes included communication, quality of service and timeliness. While 58% of CSC complaints exceeded statutory timescales due to system and workforce pressures, upheld Ombudsman complaints reduced significantly through proactive local remedies, despite an increase to 76 Ombudsman enquiries.

Complaints have driven improvements in consistency, accountability and child- and family-centred practice, including strengthened professional standards, enhanced managerial oversight, improved recording and information-sharing processes, and learning around accessibility, safeguarding and partnership working.

In Education and Inclusion services, 761 complaints were received, predominantly relating to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) delays arising from capacity pressures. There were 138 Ombudsman enquiries, with 55 complaints upheld and 68 not investigated, often because issues had already been remedied. Although significant investment has been made in SEND services, complaints in this area remain the most common reason for Ombudsman involvement, reflecting ongoing national challenges.

Overall, complaints and feedback continue to highlight areas requiring focus while supporting a clear commitment to continuous improvement and better outcomes for people using services.

## 2.0 Background

There are two distinct complaints procedures in place for Children’s Services: statutory and non-statutory routes. The statutory complaints process applies to eligible social care complainants and is structured across three stages. Stage 1 responses are led and coordinated by the designated Complaints Manager. Where the complainant remains dissatisfied, they may request a Stage 2 independent investigation, undertaken by an external investigator. If concerns persist, a Stage 3 Review Panel can be convened to consider the adequacy and robustness of the Stage 2 investigation. The non-statutory process applies to complaints that fall outside of social care eligibility criteria, including those relating to education or SEND services, or where the complainant does not hold parental responsibility.

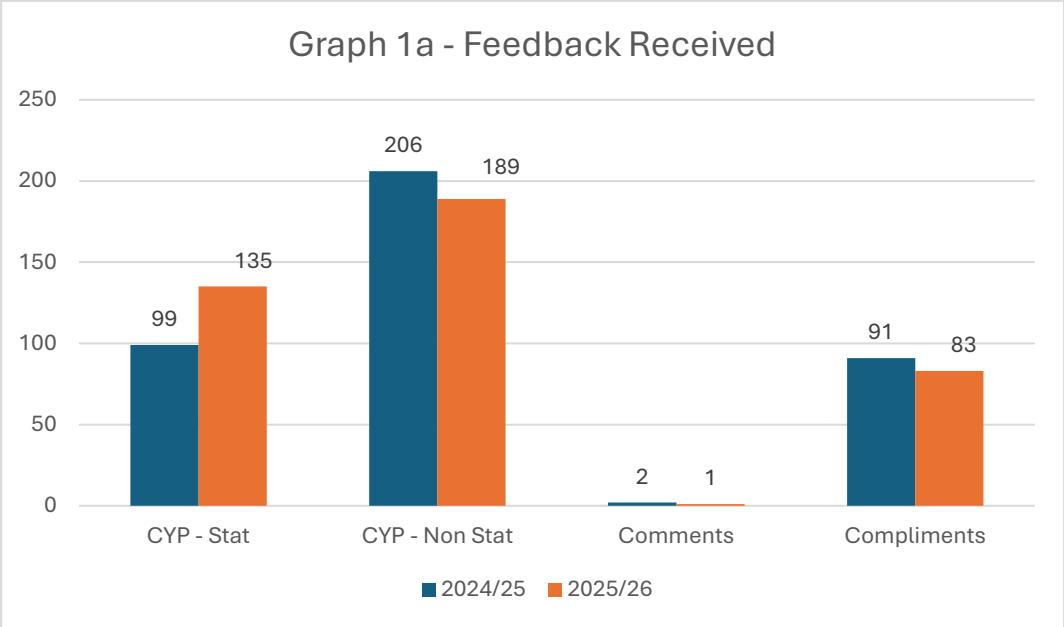
In 2025/26, total expenditure on external independent investigations for children's complaints increased significantly to £40,718.05, compared with £12,006.65 in 2024/25. This rise reflects an increased demand for Stage 2 investigations, largely driven by complex complaints originating within Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services that subsequently engaged social care functions and therefore fell within the statutory complaints procedure. This trend highlights the growing intersection between SEND and social care provision and reinforces the need for continued focus on early resolution and effective cross-service working to manage complaints proportionately and reduce escalation.

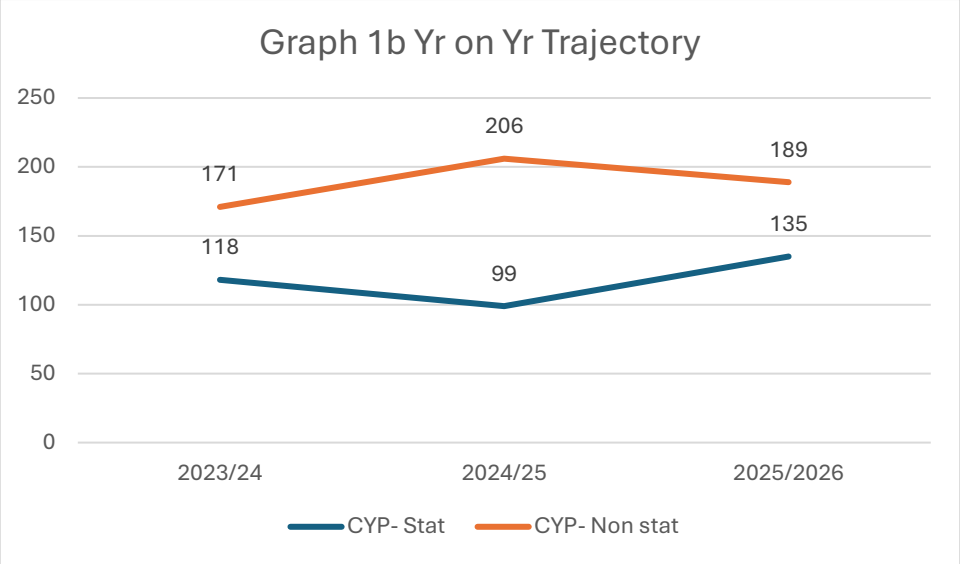
Children's Social Care complaints and feedback will be considered from section 3 onwards and SEND complaints can be found in section 9 of this report.

## 3.0 Children's Social Care

Graph 1a and 1b show the following:

- Statutory children's social care (CSC) complaints by children and those with parental responsibility, increased by 36% from 99 in 2024/25 to 135 in 2025/26.
- Non statutory children's social care complaints saw a decrease of 8% from 206 to 189 in 2025/26
- The number of compliments received in 2025/26 for children's services is 83, a slight decrease from 91 in 2024/25.

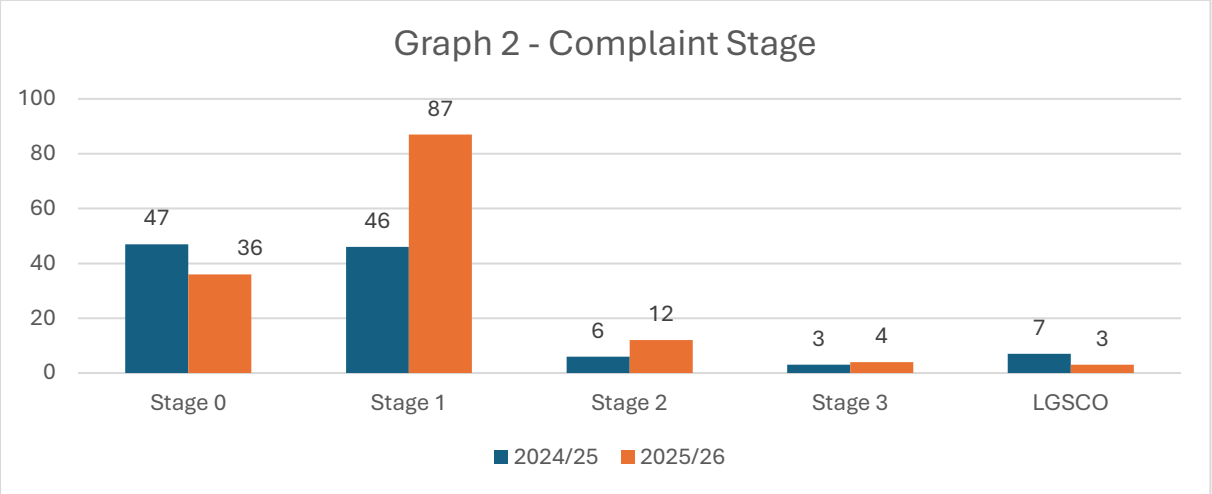





## 3.1 Statutory Complaints

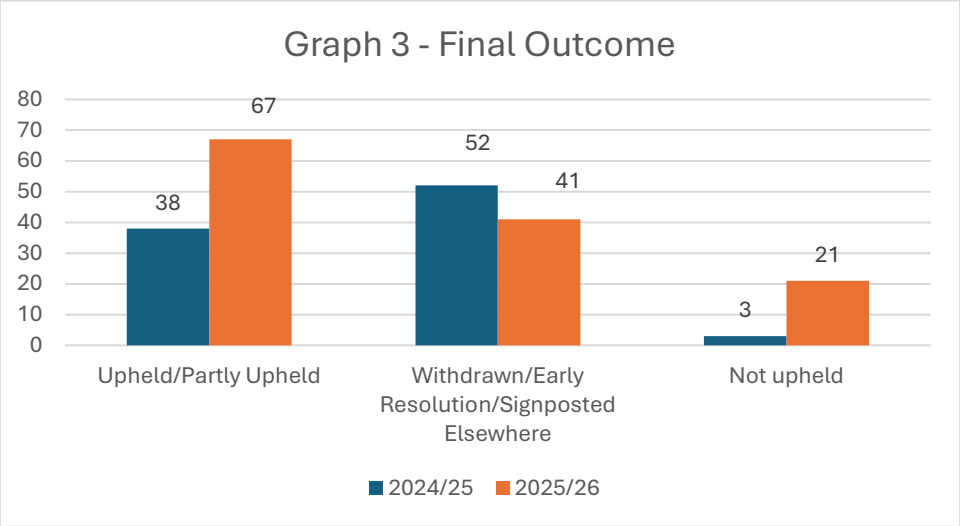
Only 1% of active social care cases result in a complaint being made. Most CSC complaints are made by parents or guardians. Only 7 complaints were made directly by children in 2025/26. The graph below shows an increase in CSC statutory complaints at stages 1 and 2. from 99 in 2024/25 to 135 for 2025/26.

The breakdown of complaints with outcomes recorded against them can be seen in Graph 2. Stage 0 is the early resolution of complaints. Numbers of complaints at Stage 1 and 2 have almost doubled. It is assumed that more robust investigations at earlier stages have led to lower numbers of upheld Ombudsman investigations. In 2025/26 the council received 76 CSC Ombudsman enquires, of which only 3 were upheld. One of these cases related to complaint handling and two were related to service provision.



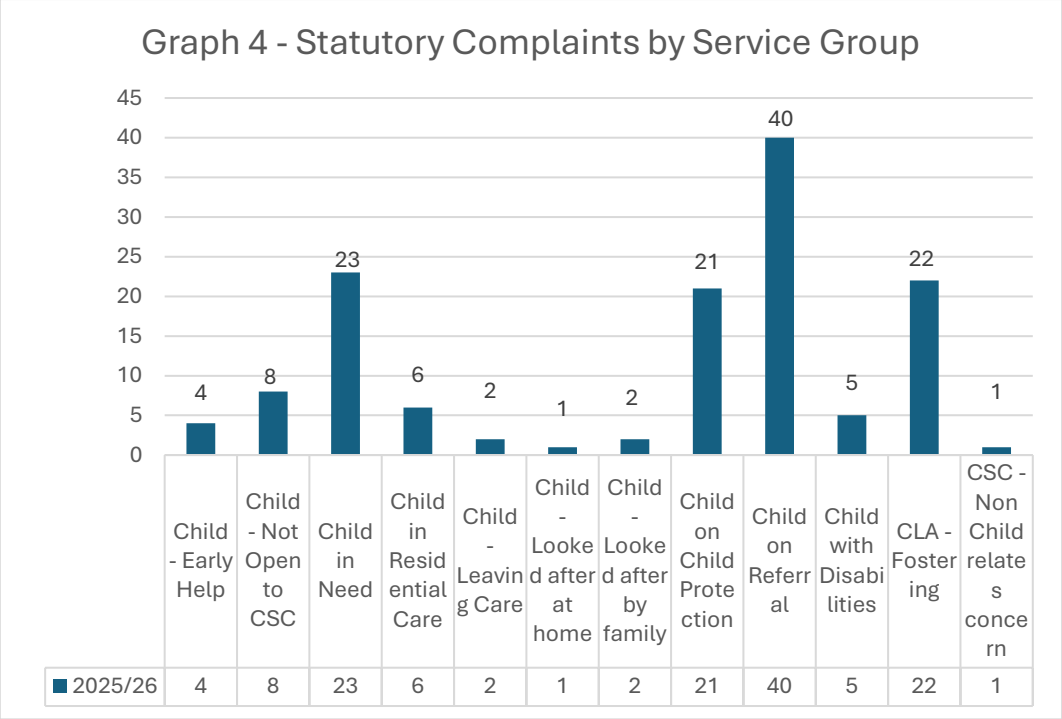
### 3.1.1 Statutory Complaints by Outcome

Graph 3 shows a breakdown of the 129 closed statutory complaints which had a final outcome recorded at the time of writing this report. Of these 21 were not upheld, 67 (52%) were upheld or partly upheld and 41 were signposted, resolved early or withdrawn. This shows that complaints are justified in just over half of all cases.



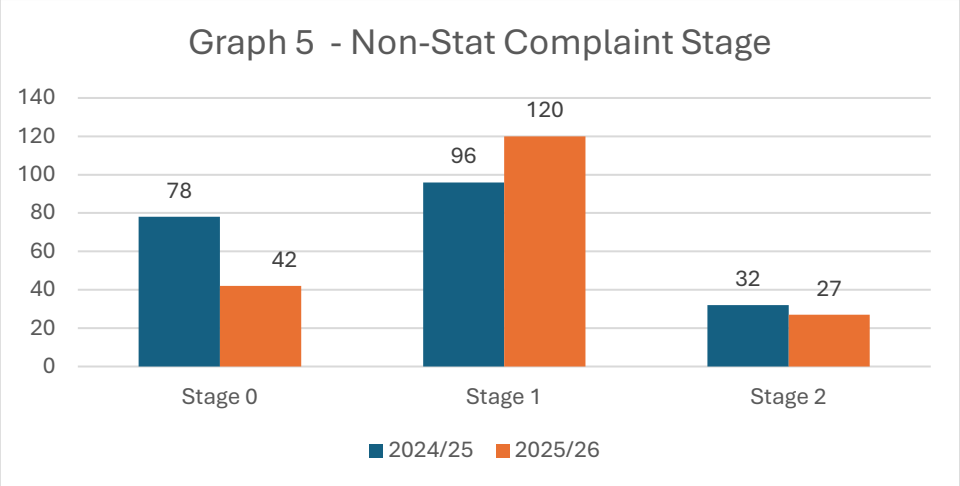

### 3.1.2 Statutory Complaints by Service Group

Graph 4 shows a breakdown by service group for the last financial year of all 135 statutory complaints. Child on referral is the most frequent subject group of complaint covering 30% of all cases.



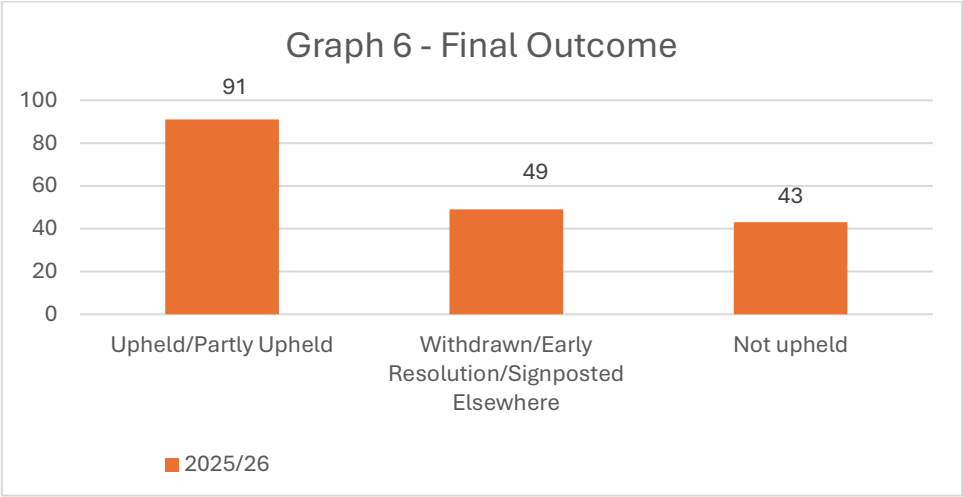

## 3.2 Non-Statutory Complaints

These complaints follow the two stage Corporate Complaints Procedure. Graph 5 below shows a decrease of 8% in CSC non-statutory complaints to make an overall total of 189 for 2025/26.



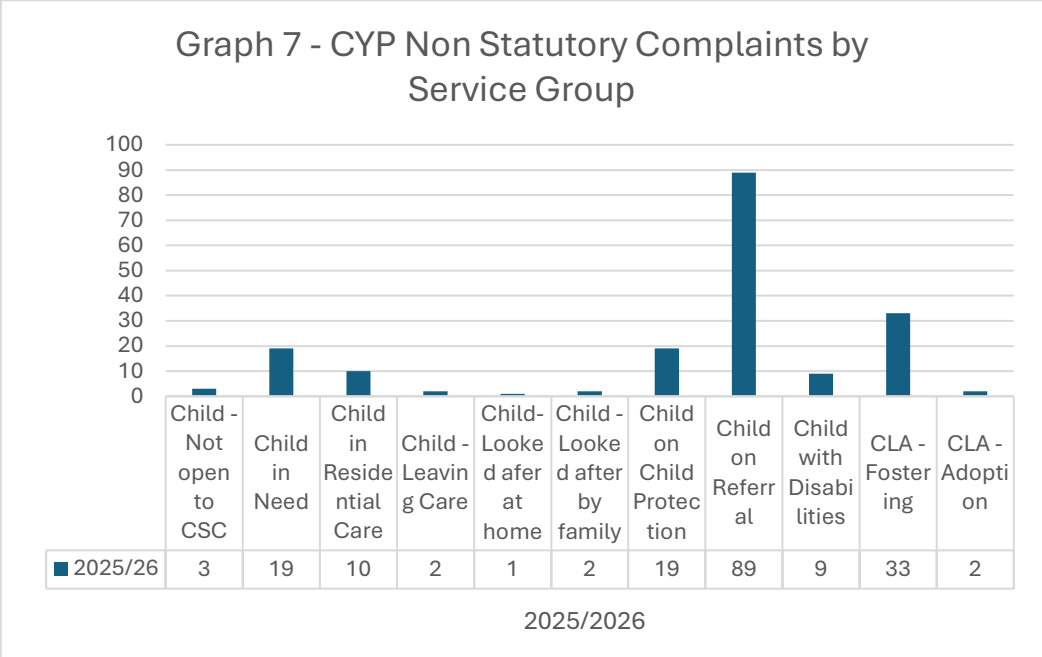

### 3.2.1 Non-Statutory Complaints by Outcome

Graph 6 shows breakdown of the 183 closed non-statutory complaints which had a final outcome recorded at the time of writing this report. Of these 43 were not upheld, 91 were upheld or partly upheld and complaints 49 were signposted, resolved early or withdrawn. Again, this shows that complaints are justified in just over half of all cases.




### 3.2.2 Non-Statutory Complaints by Service Group

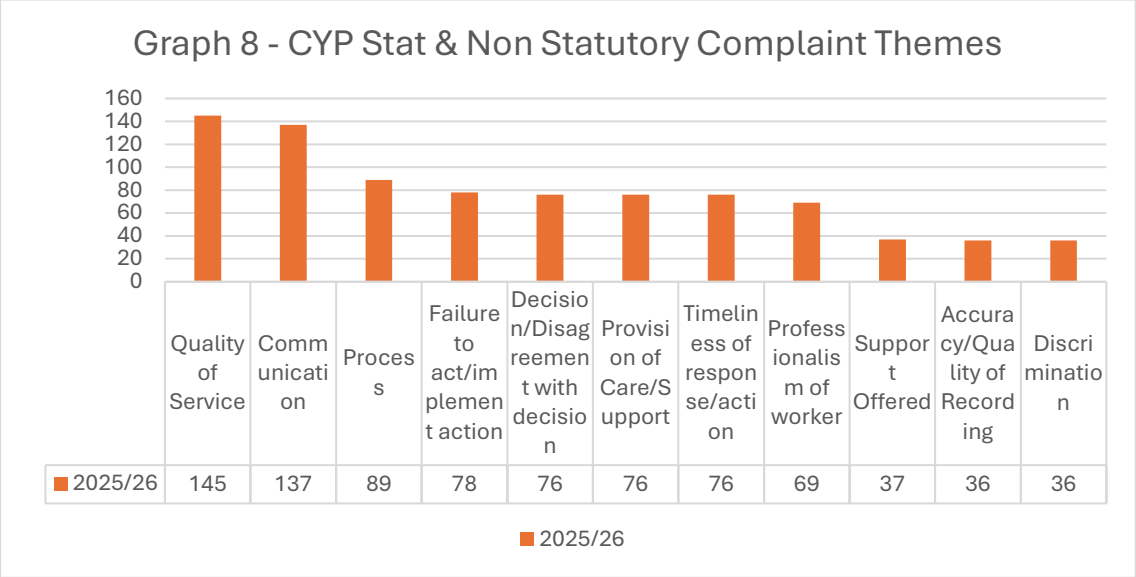
Graph 7 shows a breakdown by service group for the last financial year. 'Child on referral' remains the most frequent subject group of complaint covering 47% of all non-statutory CYP complaints.




## 4.0 What do people complain about in the statutory and non-statutory process?

Graph 8 shows a breakdown by theme. One complaint can have multiple themes. The

main theme is quality of service followed by communication which have also been frequent themes in previous years.




## 5.0 Breached Complaints

Of all statutory & non-statutory CSC complaints received, 189 exceeded the statutory 20 working day timescale across Stages 0 to 2, representing 58% of all complaints. This compares to 185 breaches in 2024/25, indicating a slight increase in the number of complaints not meeting required timescales.

## 6.0 Compliments

The number of compliments received in the last financial year have seen a slight decrease from 91 to 83. Themes and examples of compliments and feedback received across Children's Social Care can be seen in Appendices 1 and 2.




## 7.0 Thematic Learning

Capturing learning from complaints is essential, as it helps inform service improvements and ensures that identified areas for development are communicated back to teams. The main themes are listed below.

a) **Communication is the core issue:** Consistently clear, timely, transparent, and empathetic communication is critical. The way information is delivered (tone, clarity, responsiveness) significantly affects trust and satisfaction—not just the actions taken.

b) **Service user experience must be central:** Families and young people need to feel heard, validated, and involved. Perception often differs from professional intent, so active listening and emotional awareness are essential.

c) **Consistency and continuity matter:** Frequent changes in workers, poor handovers, and inconsistent messages undermine confidence. Stronger continuity planning and structured handovers are needed.

d) **Clear explanations of decisions and thresholds:** Families require simple, consistent explanations of roles, legal powers, thresholds, and entitlements to reduce confusion and repeated complaints.

e) **Timeliness and accountability:** Delays in communication, assessments, decisions, and financial processes drive dissatisfaction. Clear tracking, ownership, and follow-up are required.

f) **Recording and transparency:** Accurate, timely, and well-rationalised records are essential for safeguarding, trust, and resolving disputes.

g) **Stronger multi-agency coordination:** Better alignment, role clarity, and information sharing between partners are needed to avoid mixed messages and delays.

h) **Workforce practice and oversight:** Reflective supervision, management oversight, and reinforcement of professional standards (tone, conduct, safeguarding responsibilities) are key to improving consistency.

i) **Proactive engagement reduces escalation:** Early, direct communication and responsiveness to concerns can prevent issues becoming formal complaints.

j) **Child-centred and trauma-informed practice:** Decisions and plans must prioritise the child's voice, emotional wellbeing, stability, and lived experience, alongside supporting families and carers.

Learning from complaints and improvements to social care provision is presented in a 'You said we did' format in Appendix 3. The message from all feedback is that we must strengthen communication, maintain relationships, improve planning, and ensure transparency across all areas of practice.

## 8.0 Children's Social Care Improvements

The main theme of statutory complaints is the need to improve the quality of service delivered and improve communication 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 2026/27 CSC officers will embed the following actions into service delivery:

1. **Strengthening Communication and Engagement**

- Improve clarity, timeliness, and consistency of communication with children, young people, and families.
- Provide clearer explanations of decisions, thresholds, and processes.
- Offer multiple contact routes and regular updates (including meetings, written communication, and check-ins).
- Ensure families and young people are actively involved in decision-making and planning.
- Address poor communication through supervision, feedback, and staff training.

**2. Improving Workforce Practice and Accountability**

- Provide reflective supervision and direct feedback to social workers to improve practice (especially communication style and professionalism).
- Reallocate cases or change workers where relationships have broken down.
- Strengthen management oversight, including audits, supervision, and escalation processes.
- Investigate concerns about conduct and take appropriate action.

**3. Enhancing Assessment, Planning and Timeliness**

- Complete Child and Family Assessments, CIN plans, and Care Act assessments within required timescales.
- Improve quality and accuracy of assessments and ensure records are updated promptly.
- Ensure care planning, pathway plans, and transition plans are clear, coordinated, and regularly reviewed.
- Reduce delays in services such as housing, education provision, and therapeutic support.

**4. Increasing Stability and Continuity**

- Reduce unnecessary changes of social workers and improve handovers when changes occur.
- Maintain continuity of support for children, young people, and families.
- Provide consistent points of contact and clear arrangements during staff absence.

**5. Strengthening Safeguarding and Risk Management**

- Review and improve responses to safeguarding concerns, including clearer protocols and professional roles.
- Ensure timely, coordinated multi-agency responses to risks.
- Implement and monitor Child in Need and Child Protection plans effectively.
- Take appropriate protective action where risks escalate.

**6. Improving Placement, Accommodation and Transitions**

- Actively seek suitable placements and accommodation options, including specialist provision where needed.
- Improve contingency planning during placement breakdowns or crises.
- Strengthen transition planning (e.g. to adulthood, housing, independence).
- Provide financial and practical support for housing and care leavers.

**7. Ensuring Financial Transparency and Support**

- Provide clear information about financial entitlements, payments, and support arrangements.
- Correct errors in payments, reimburse missed or delayed funds, and improve systems to prevent recurrence.
- Offer financial guidance (e.g. benefits, allowances, support packages).
- Review and clarify policies (e.g. SGO, Direct Payments, allowances).

**8. Embedding Learning, Quality Assurance and Service Improvement**

- Share learning from complaints across teams to improve practice.
- Update procedures, systems, and training based on identified issues.
- Strengthen recording, information-sharing, and governance processes.
- Improve multi-agency working and coordination.

**9. Providing Apology, Resolution and Redress**

- Offer apologies where service failure or poor experience occurred.
- Resolve issues early where possible through direct engagement with families.
- Provide remedies such as financial reimbursement, revised support, or service changes.
- Signpost to escalation routes (e.g. Ombudsman) where appropriate.

Looking ahead, the council must focus in 2026/2027 on:

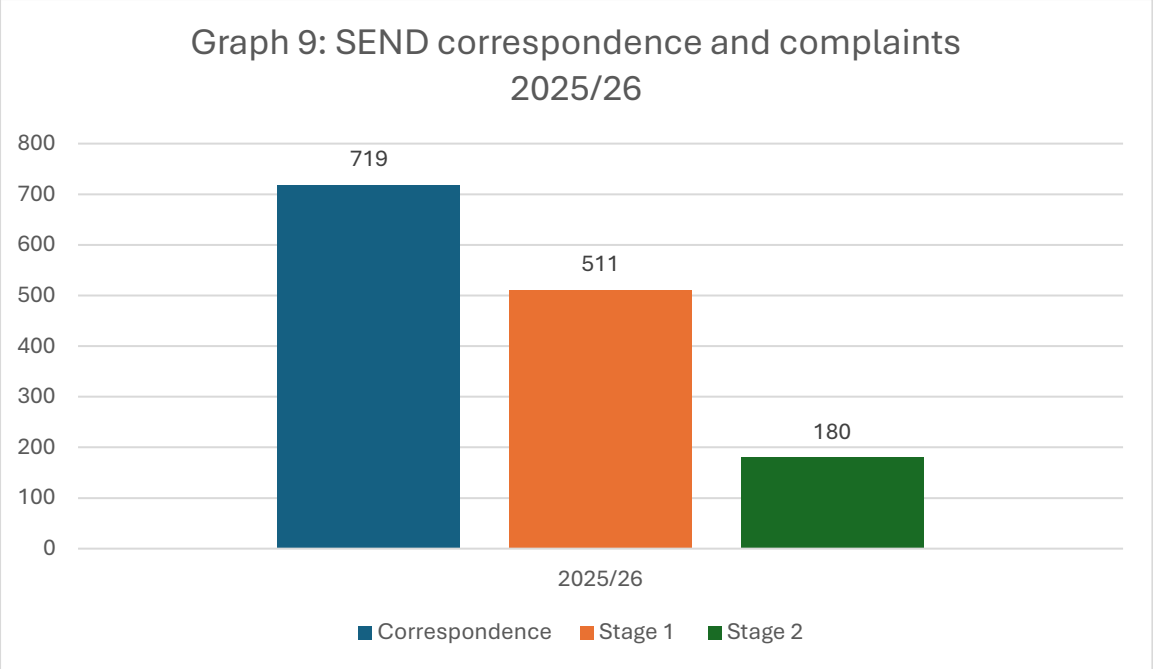
- More child-centred, transparent practice
- Stronger communication and relationships
- Better oversight, accountability, and consistency
- Timely, coordinated, and needs-led service delivery

## 9.0 Special Educational Needs Service (SEND)

### 9.1 SEND Statistics

Non statutory, inclusion service formal complaints follow the Corporate Complaints Procedure. Due to a change in data collection and IT systems, limited information is available for corporate informal complaints about children with special educational needs and education matters.

Graph 9 below shows SEND complaints and correspondence received.




SEND complaints are made mainly by parents complaining on behalf of their child who have or want an Educational Health and Care Plan (EHC plan). National pressures continue at unprecedented levels. The number of SEND complaints reflects both the scale of challenge and the visibility of the service. A total of £41,250 was paid out in Stage 1 and 2 financial remedies which has resulted in less SEND complaints being investigated by the Ombudsman (see section 10).

In addition, 70 separate Education related complaints were also made during this period.

## 9.2 SEND complaint themes.

Parents and guardians complain of the following issues:

- Delays in EHC assessments (not meeting statutory timescales)
- Lack of suitable school placements
- Disagreements over special vs mainstream school placements
- Missed annual reviews
- Poor communication
- Inaccurate EHC Plans, for example a disputed school in the plan

Managers take the findings from upheld complaints extremely seriously. They represent real families and children who have not received the service they deserve.

Senior managers are informed of the themes and learning from complaints and the

Compliance and Assurance Board offers a governance role, to oversee improvements.

### 9.4 SEND improvements

The council invested £10.6m in SEND and Education Services at the end of the financial year 2025/26. Staffing capacity has risen from 250 full time equivalent officers to 320 full time equivalent officers in 2025/26. This is an increase of 28%, which has reduced the backlog of delayed assessments.

The following actions took place in 2025/26:

- A comprehensive recovery plan to address delays in EHC assessments and annual reviews,
- More than 2000 Educational Psychology (EP) assessments,
- More than 500 extra special school places commissioned,
- Working with schools to improve mainstream inclusion; and,
- SEND staff training in complaints and statutory duties.

The service is committed to restoring trust and delivering the inclusive, timely, and high-quality support that every child deserves, managers will:

- Increase SEND complaints team capacity by 2 additional full-time staff,
- Maintain productivity to reduce the backlog,
- Secure funding for additional EP assessments,
- Monitor progress through an EHC Plan dashboard; and,
- Continue staff training and communication improvements

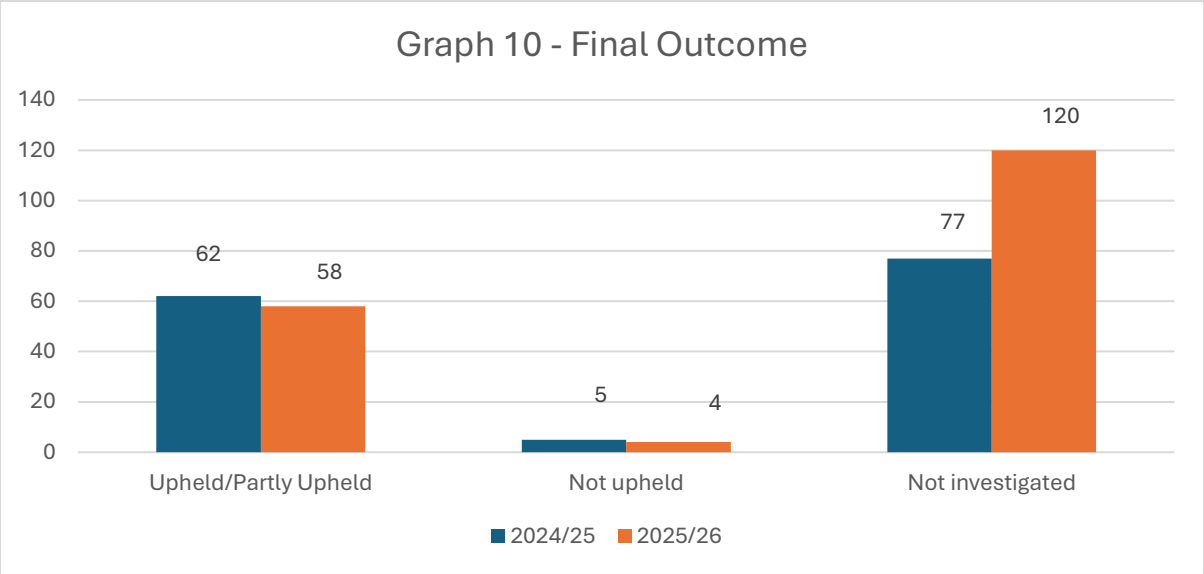
## 10.0 Ombudsman Complaints

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 2025/26 the Ombudsman received a total of 214 separate enquiries in relation to CSC, Inclusion and Education Services in Lancashire. This is an overall rise of 32% as in 2024/25 it was 162. There were 76 separate enquiries in relation to CSC and 138 in relation to Inclusion and Education Services.

A total of 182 decisions were made by the Ombudsman in 2025/26 for these services compared with 144 in 2024/25. This is an overall rise of 26% in complaint investigations.

Graph 10 below shows a breakdown by outcome of all with council actions. Of the 58 upheld decisions, 55 cases were SEND/ Education matters (95%) and only 3 cases related to CSC, a significant reduction from 7 in 2024/25. 120 cases were not investigated, and this number has increased due to the council remedying many of these complaints early.




## 10.1 Learning from Ombudsman complaints

SEND dominates the learning from Ombudsman complaint decisions with recurrent and systemic issues frequently identified. The learning is as follows:

**a. Delays in SEND processes**
Most cases relate to SEND (EHCPs, assessments, provision).
Repeated faults include:

- Delays issuing EHCPs or amended plans, assessments or reviews
- Failure to arrange alternative education when children are out of school

**Learning:**
Strengthen timeliness, tracking, and escalation processes across the SEND pathway. Consider regular audits and quality assurance.

**b. Failure to secure provision set out in EHCPs**
Some cases highlight missed or inconsistent Section F provision and delays in arranging therapy or education

**Learning:**
The council must ensure robust systems to monitor delivery of provision and act quickly when provision is not in place.

**c. Poor communication with families and quality and clarity of information provided**

- Frequent remedies include:
    - Apologies for lack of updates
    - Findings where families had to chase responses
    - Detailed explanations not provided (direct payments)

**Learning:**
The council needs to adhere to timely communication standards and provide clear points of contact and regular updates to parents/carers. We must provide clear, transparent written information for families when requested.

**d. Failure to follow correct processes and statutory duties**
Examples include:

- Not issuing formal decision letters
- Not advising families of appeal rights (SEND Tribunal)
- Not using the correct statutory complaints procedure
- Delays with Stage 2 responses (CSC)

**Learning:**
The council should reinforce staff understanding of:

- Legal duties
- Statutory timescales
- Correct complaint handling pathways.

## 10.2. Ombudsman Financial Remedies

A total of £101,700 was paid out for SEND upheld complaints and £450 for a CSC complaint, making a total of £102,150 for all of children's services for 2025/26. This is an increase of £6,778 on 2024/25 when a total of £95,372 was paid.

There were no public reports in relation to children and young people in 2025/26.

## Appendix 1: Compliment Themes for Children's Social Care

Feedback received highlights consistently high levels of satisfaction with the Local Authority's Children's Social Care services, particularly in the areas of compassion, professionalism, and positive impact on children and families.

a) **Strong Relationships and Support**
Families, carers and professionals frequently described staff as approachable, supportive, and reliable. Social workers and practitioners were recognised for building trusting relationships, helping individuals feel listened to, valued, and respected. Many comments emphasised the importance of consistent support during difficult and uncertain times.

b) **Compassionate, Child-Centred Practice**
Staff were widely praised for their kindness, empathy, and ability to handle sensitive situations with care and professionalism. Practice was consistently described as child-focused, ensuring that the voice, needs, and wellbeing of children remained central to decision-making.

c) **High Quality Professional Practice**
Reports, assessments, and interventions were highlighted as being thorough, insightful, and informative. Professionals demonstrated strong knowledge, clear communication, and effective multi-agency working, contributing to well-informed decisions and positive outcomes.

d) **Making a Positive Difference**
Many families and young people expressed gratitude for the meaningful difference made to their lives. Feedback described improved wellbeing, increased stability, and progress for children, with staff playing a key role in achieving these outcomes.

e) **Going Above and Beyond**
Numerous compliments recognised staff for exceeding expectations, showing dedication, persistence, and commitment beyond their core roles. This included responding quickly in times of need, maintaining consistent contact, and providing reassurance and guidance throughout journeys with the service.

f) **Positive Experience of Services**
Overall experiences of working with the Local Authority were described as supportive, responsive, and well-organised. Processes such as fostering applications and assessments were often highlighted as clear, manageable, and well-supported.

## Appendix 2: Outstanding Compliments

**Compassion & Care**

- *"You really are one lovely, kind person… caring and professional when discussing sensitive issues"*
- *"Outstanding support… compassionate, child-focused practice at its best"*

**Support & Relationships**

- "*She has been a rock of support… we may have 'thrown in the towel' without her."*
- *"They felt like family… warm, supportive and went out of their way."*
- *"You ensured she felt listened to, valued, and supported – building real trust."*

**Professional Practice**

- "*The report was fantastic, informative, and showed real understanding of the child and family."*
- *"One of the best social workers we've ever had – efficient, supportive, and reliable."*

**Impact & Difference Made**

- *"I will be eternally grateful… you made a difference to our family."*
- *"She went above and beyond… a key role in achieving progress for the young person."*

## Appendix 3: You said we did…

**Placement and Autism Support**

**He said (Young Person):**
"I don't feel understood where I'm living. Staff don't really get my autism, and things get overwhelming really quickly. It ends up making everything worse."

**She said (Practitioner):**
"We followed the current placement plan, but it's clear we need to rethink suitability and ensure the provision meets his specific needs."

**Outcome / Learning:**

- Specialist autism knowledge is essential.
- Placements must match needs to reduce distress and avoid restrictive interventions.

**Involvement in Decisions**

**He said (Young Person):**
"I asked for a different social worker, but no one really listened. It felt like my views didn't matter."

**She said (Service):**
"We completed the homelessness assessment, but we recognise we didn't fully respond to the request regarding social worker changes."

**Outcome / Learning:**

- Young people must be actively involved in decisions.
- Preferences (e.g. worker relationships) should be responded to wherever possible.

**Stability, Family Contact and Education**

**She said (Young Person):**
"My social worker keeps changing. I have to explain everything again and again. No one tells me what's happening with my family or school properly."

**He said (Service):**
"We maintained the plan, but there were delays in communication, education arrangements, and progressing life story work."

**Outcome / Learning:**

- Consistency in social workers builds trust.
- Family contact needs clear, timely communication.
- Education planning must be coordinated and proactive.
- Financial records and life story work should be progressed without delay.

**Financial Transparency**

**He said (Young Person):**
"I don't understand what's happening with my money. I feel like I have to complain just to get answers."

**She said (Service):**
"We apologised and began reviewing the savings records and arrangements, ensuring the young person would receive a clear breakdown."

**Outcome / Learning:**

- Young people must be fully informed about their finances.
- Transparency and clear record-keeping are essential.
- Concerns must be addressed quickly to reduce distress.

**Placement Breakdown and Support**

**She said (Carer/Young Person perspective):**
"We were left feeling unsure what would happen next. When things started to fall apart, it felt like we were managing alone."

**He said (Service):**
"We worked to secure alternative placements and provided additional support, though communication could have been clearer throughout."

**Outcome / Learning:**

- Clear communication during uncertainty is critical.
- Contingency planning must be explicit.
- Carers need practical and emotional support during crises.

**Feeling Heard and Respected**

**He said (Young Person):**
"I didn't feel believed. It wasn't just what was decided – it was how people spoke to me."

**She said (Service):**
"We reviewed the assessment, apologised, and introduced a revised support plan with clearer communication expectations."

**Outcome / Learning:**

- Young people need to feel listened to and respected.
- Communication style matters as much as decisions.
- Reflective practice improves engagement and trust.

**Overall Thematic "He Said / She Said" Learning**

**Young People collectively:**
"Listen to us, be honest, and keep things consistent. We want to understand what's happening and feel involved."

**Service response:**
"We must strengthen communication, maintain relationships, improve planning, and ensure transparency across all areas of practice."