

Together for Children
Customer Feedback Six Month Summary Report
April 2023- September 2023



HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY

What are our key achievements?

- We have received 88 compliments so far this year from children, young people, families, and professionals.
- We have successfully helped 78 customers to receive satisfactory resolutions to their queries, issues or concerns informally, without having to initiate a complaint.
- Our local arrangement with two Local Authorities for the provision of Independent Persons (at stage 2 of the complaints process) has increased the availability and timeliness of IP's whilst also reducing costs.
- The new complaint management system, Respond is providing better insights relating to complaints data and we will soon be able to analyse Initial Contacts through the system reporting.

What are our areas of focus?

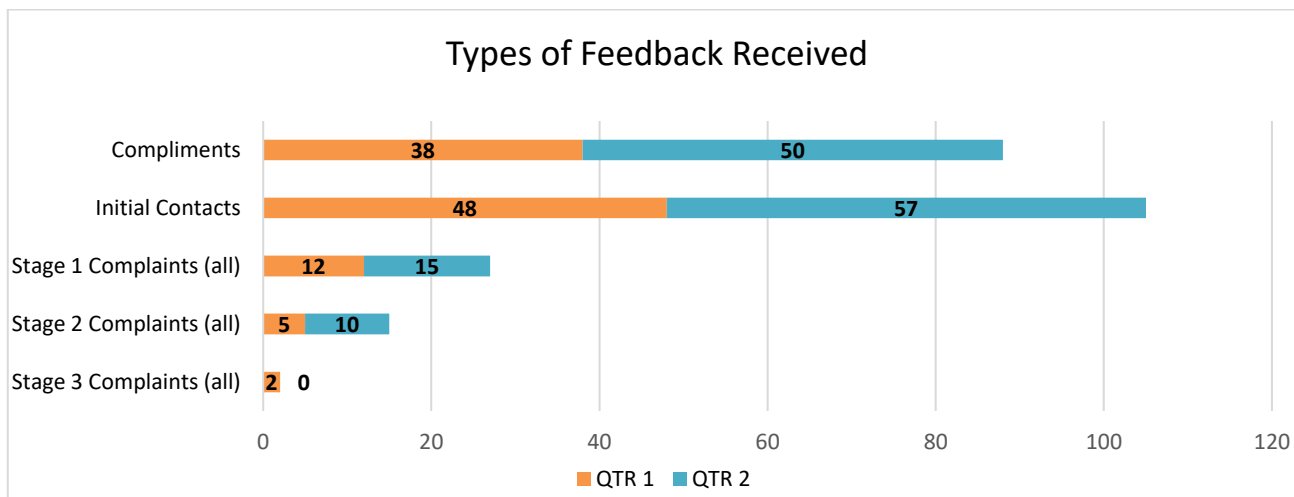
- Continued focus on improving the timeliness of complaints at stages 1 and 2.
- Look at the reasons for an increase in complaint numbers and escalations to see if any improvements can be made to resolve issues at an earlier stage.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1. This report covers the period 1st April to 30th September 2023. Together for Children (TfC) welcomes all forms of feedback as a way of improving service delivery to children, young people and families. The report provides an overview of customer feedback received in the last six months, identifying topics and trends in relation to complaints information and areas of organisational learning that have taken place in response to feedback received.

2. SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

- 2.1. The Customer Feedback Team are responsible for receiving, recording, and responding to feedback received from children, young people and families regarding services delivered by Together for Children. The following graph shows the different types of feedback received in quarters one and two.



3. COMPLIMENTS

- 3.1. We have received 88 compliments in the last six months from children and young people, parents and other family members, foster carers, external professionals, and staff within TfC. Compliments are communicated to workers and management structures of the relevant teams and they are used to congratulate workers and teams and to inform service developments and best practice. Compliments are also shared more widely with the Senior Management Team, so all staff can be recognised for their dedication and hard work. Below are some examples of the compliments we have received in the last six months:

Business Support, Social Care

I would just like it to be noted that Sam has done an amazing job in the organisation of the fostering and permanence panel for 17.04.2023. There were some difficulties around the availability of the Chair and other panel members. Sam worked with all to ensure that there was sufficient availability of panel members and that the panel was quorate. This I realise was not an easy task and took some negotiation to complete. I am very appreciative.

Permanence Teams

Rachel, firstly the words thank you do not do justice to the gratitude I owe you. What felt like being passed from pillar to post and not being heard then to have someone who, listened, heard understood and acted on their word and for good reason told me no. Rachel you are a credit to your job and TfC are lucky to have you. Going above and beyond to get us where we are today.

Child Protection Teams

I chaired a review conference this morning and it was evident that Ola has worked hard to develop excellent relationships with family, has made appropriate and timely referrals to services such as Wear Together and

CYPS and the core group has worked well together and has been invested in positive outcomes for A. There is a strong family network in place and Ola has been pivotal in supporting this, and A has been involved throughout and Ola's practice has been very child-centred. Wear Together completed a SALT assessment early into the involvement and this really helped to demonstrate to family, and A that professionals were invested in them and wanted to better understand the issues. A is no longer going missing, risks within the community have reduced, family relationships are much improved, A is attending school and she is more positive and hopeful about her future. This is an example of excellent practice.

Fostering Team

Thank you for all your help through difficult times Glyn. You did an amazing job helping answering our questions and had a very good understanding of the process involved.

Assessment Teams

My life during pregnancy really took its toll on me at times and I just wanted to thank you for all the times you allowed me to vent, it really did help having somebody I could talk to. I wish you all the best in your career, you're going to be amazing. All the best.

Early Help

Just wanted to pass on my thanks to you Joanne and all the staff at the R.I.S.E group for the last few months. It's been really helpful for X and her anxiety. Taking her out of her comfort zone has helped her realise she can do things and enjoy it. She's just come back from Battlefield Live and said it was amazing!!! Thanks again.

Children's Homes

Can I thank everyone at Colombo Road for making this as smooth a transition as possible for X and share my appreciation for the care and support she has received throughout.

Next Steps Team

X was very complimentary about Kirsty & Julie Ann. She felt that everything changed for the better when Next Steps became involved with all 3 of her sons.

Children with Disabilities Team

Lincolnshire Children's Services had visited on Friday, and the outcome from my transfer is positive, their Children with Disabilities team has accepted X and a CIN assessment will be carried out. They also said to Laura, how impressed they were with the transfer information that was passed on from Tara, and what good positive contact that they received when they needed more information whether that was via telephone or email. They said that they were able to build a good picture of X and the family even before meeting them.

Children's Independent Reviewing Team

Lynne, thank you so much for all of your love, support and kindness over the last years from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for taking care of my boys. I'm forever in your debt.

Customer Feedback Team

I have been working with Nicola Vallance-Grant for several months and as expected, Nicola is always professional, clear and transparent. Though, in addition, I would like to make note of how she comes across. Nicola has such a lovely personality that shines through into every meeting we have. I watch each interviewee breath a sign of relief as Nicola puts them at ease and explains in detail the process. Nicola is able to make what could be such a daunting meeting more serene for them. Though my reports acknowledge her professionalism throughout the investigations, there is no way to feed back this additional information, and as

a social worker for many years, I'm aware how rare compliments are, and wanted to take the time to write this. I can only describe Nicola as having an infectious personality and wanted to say what a pleasure she is to work with.

Finance

I have recently investigated a Stage 2 complaint (regarding Special Guardianship Allowance). Nicola was extremely helpful when I spoke with her recently regarding the investigation. Despite the family in question, not being a family she was currently involved with, she came to our Teams meeting very well prepared. Nicola was able to offer a good, clear, and knowledgeable explanation of process which was really helpful. She also provided supporting evidence to assist with the investigation. The information provided by Nicola was very useful and using the information allowed me to complete a comprehensive response to our complainant.

4. INITIAL CONTACTS

- 4.1. Initial contacts presented by customers can be queries, concerns, information requests or issues that require a resolution. Whilst customers are provided with information about the complaints process and their rights to complain, we aim to achieve informal resolution at the earliest opportunity so that the customer receives a quick resolution and has a better experience. The table below shows the initial contacts data for quarters one and two:

Initial Contacts	Q1 (Apr - Jun)	Q2 (Jul - Sept)	Totals	
			No	%
Number Received	48	57	105	-
Resolved as Initial Contact	36	41	78	73%
Progressed to Stage 1	12	15	27	27%

- 4.2. We have received 105 initial contacts in the last six months. Through responding to contacts at the outset, we have helped 78 (73%) of our customers to receive satisfactory responses and resolutions informally with 27 contacts (27%) progressing to a formal stage one complaint.

An example of an initial contact:

A father was unhappy that his Family Time was cancelled at short notice. An apology was offered immediately by the Family Time team and reassurance given that the cancelled time was rearranged at the earliest opportunity. The Team Manager followed up the complaint with the Family Time Team and ensured amendments were made to the time accordingly and spoke to the father to reiterate the apology. He accepted the response and did not wish to pursue a formal complaint.

5. COMPLAINTS PROCESS

- 5.1. **Children's Social Care Complaints** - follows statutory guidance and is a 3-stage process as follows:

- **Stage One** – the initial stage of the process is investigated by an Officer in the Customer Feedback Team. It is hoped a local resolution can be achieved within 10 working days, however an extension of up to 20 working days can be requested for more complex cases.
- **Stage Two** – on receipt of the response to their stage one complaint, customers have 20 working days to request their complaint is progressed to stage two if they are unhappy with the initial outcome. At this stage, an Investigating Officer will be appointed to investigate the complaint and an Independent Person who will be involved in all aspects of consideration of the complaint. The investigation can take between 25-65 working days to complete.
- **Stage Three** – if the customer remains unhappy with the outcome of the stage two complaint, they have 20 working days to request their complaint is progressed to stage three. The review should take place within 30 days of the request. At stage three, a review panel will be appointed to review the complaint.

This will consist of three independent people who will make recommendations to the Director of Children’s Services.

5.2. If the customer remains unhappy, they can raise their complaint with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

5.3. **Corporate Complaints** - any complaints that do not relate to Statutory Children’s Services, are handled under the corporate complaints procedure which consists of the following two formal stages.

- **Stage One** – the initial stage of the process is investigated by an Officer in the Customer Feedback Team. It is hoped a local resolution can be achieved within 10 working days; however, an extension can be requested for more complex cases.
- **Stage Two** – on receipt of the response to their stage one complaint, customers have 20 working days to request their complaint is progressed to stage two if they are unhappy with the initial outcome. At this stage, an Investigating Officer will be appointed to investigate the complaint within 25 working days; however, an extension can be requested for more complex cases.

5.4. If the customer remains unhappy, they can raise their complaint with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

6. COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

6.1. The table below shows the number of complaints we received across each stage of the complaints process:

	Social Care		Total Q1		Corporate		Total Q2		Overall			
	Q1	Q2			Q1	Q2			Q1	Q2	Total	
Stage 1	5	9	14	+8	7	6	13	+9	12	15	27	+17
Stage 2	2	6	8	+6	3	4	7	+4	5	10	15	+10
Stage 3	2	0	2	+2	N/A	N/A	0	-	2	0	2	+2
Totals	9	15	24	+16	10	10	20	+13	19	25	44	+29

6.1. **Overall Total (all stages)** - In the first six months of the year we received 44 complaints compared with 15 in the same period of 2022/23, which is an overall increase of 29.

6.2. **Stage One Complaints** – we have received 14 Children’s Social Care stage one complaints compared with 6 for the same period in 2022/23. We also saw an increase in the number of Corporate stage one complaints, receiving 13 compared with four in the same period last year.

6.3. **Stage two Complaints** – we have received 8 children’s social care stage two complaints compared with 2 in 2022/23. We also received 7 corporate stage two complaints compared with 3 in 2022/23.

6.4. **Stage three Complaints (Children’s social care)** –2 complaints have progressed to stage three whereas we had 0 last year.

Number of Complaints by Young People:

6.5. There were 0 complaints received by young people in the first six months of the year.

7. STAGE ONE COMPLAINTS

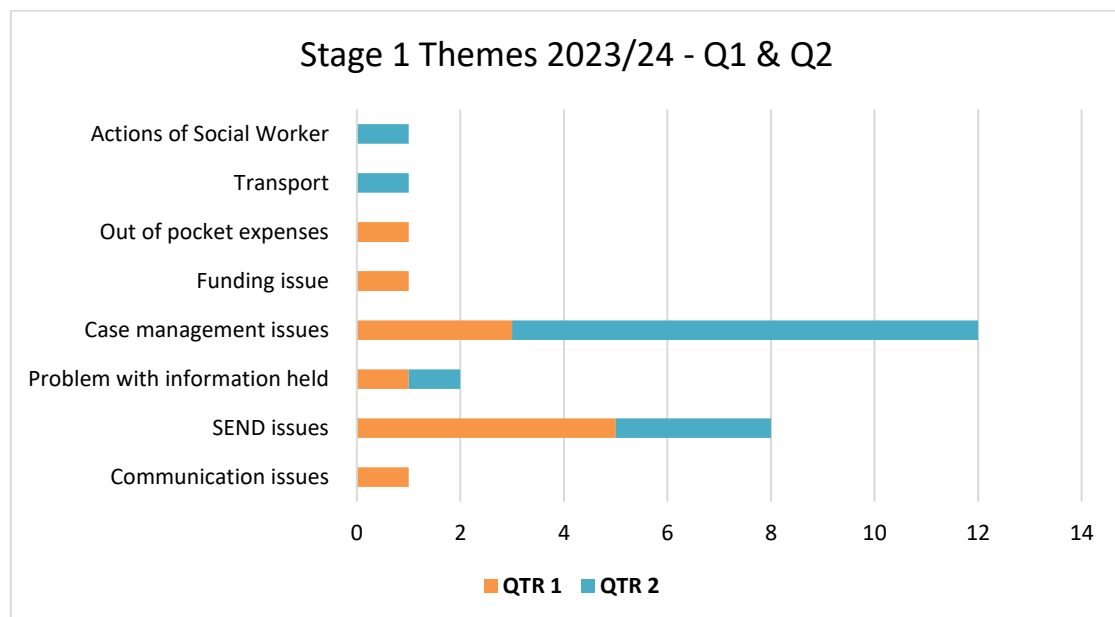
7.1. The table below shows the number and percentage of stage one complaints received by service area.

TEAM	No Stage 1 Complaints	% Stage 1 Complaints
SEND Team	10	37.0%
Assessment Teams	5	18.5%
Child Protection Teams	4	14.8%
Adoption Team	2	7.4%
Connected Carers Team	1	3.7%
ICRT	1	3.7%
Children with Disabilities Team	1	3.7%
Early Help	1	3.7%
Permanence Teams	1	3.7%
Education - Transport	1	3.7%
TOTAL	27	100%

7.2. Ten complaints received in the first six months relate to the SEND team with five complaints following for the Assessment Teams.

Themes:

7.3. The main themes of the complaints received at Stage one are shown in the table below:



7.4. The largest area of complaint relates to case management issues where customers have issues with our actions or non-action or a disagreement with decisions made. The second highest theme is issues relating to SEND.

Timeliness of Response to Stage One Complaints:

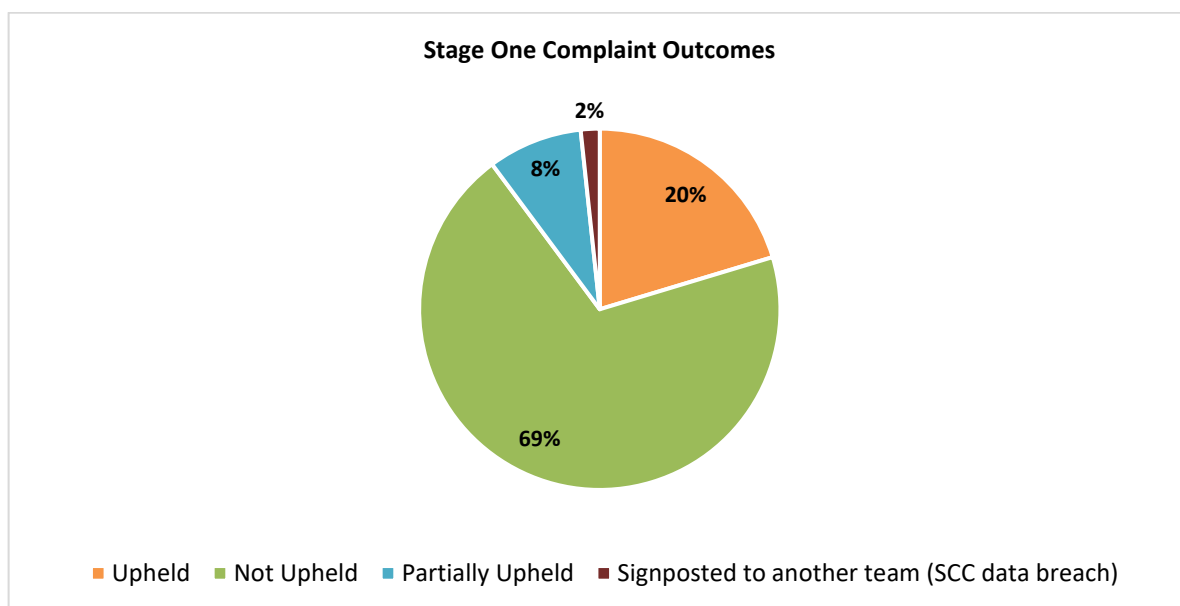
7.5. In the first six months of 2023/24, 21 of the 27 stage one complaints were concluded. There was a dip in timeliness in quarter two but overall, 71% were completed in timescale which overall is similar to the previous year.

% of all stage 1 complaints responded to in timescale	Q1	Q2	Overall
	80% (8 out of 10)	64% (7 out of 11)	71% (15 out of 21)

7.6. Stage 1 complaints are managed within the Customer Feedback Team with a greater focus on customer conciliation, mediation, and resolution e.g. offering opportunities for customers to meet with workers and managers so they can listen, discuss, and resolve their issues rather than moving to the lengthier stage two process (where this is possible). This increases customer satisfaction by resolving issues at this stage however it has consequently taken some stage one complaints out of timescale. We continue to focus on how to achieve the same result but within the 10 or 20 working day timescales.

Stage One Complaint Outcomes:

7.7. There were 59 elements of complaint identified within stage one complaints that were concluded in the first six months of 2022-23. The outcomes of those stage one complaint elements are shown below.



7.8. Of the 59 elements of complaint, 41 were not upheld (69%). Only 12 elements (20%) were upheld, a further 5 elements (8%) were partially upheld. Of the 12 upheld elements, 4 related to SEND issues, 3 were problems with information held, 2 were case management issues, 2 were communication issues and 1 was Social Worker conduct.

An example of a stage one social care (statutory) complaint:

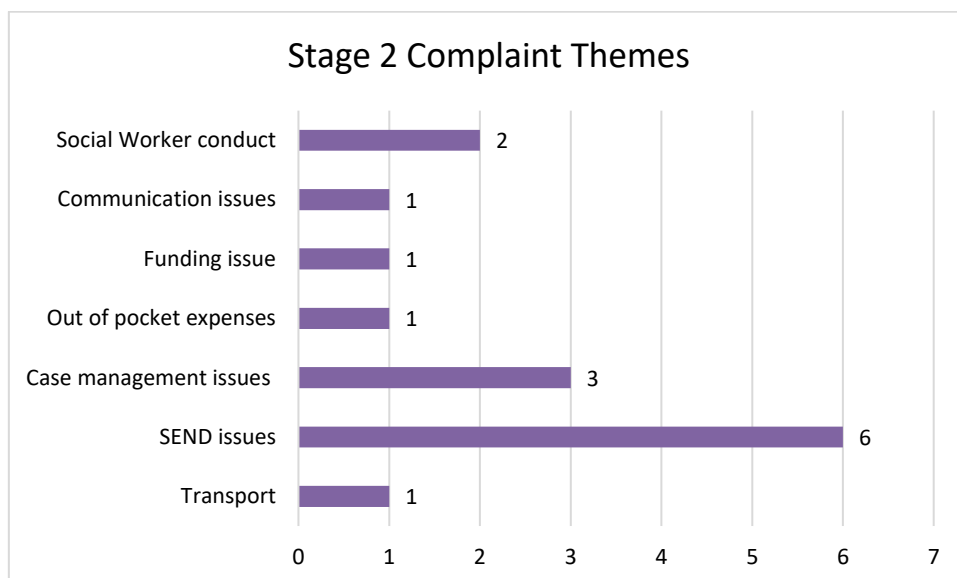
A parent was unhappy that Together for Children (TfC) had changed the social worker assigned to her daughter’s case on more than one occasion. She felt that this could lead to inconsistency in the work carried out on the case and she requested that they have a single social worker assigned to the case throughout in order to provide stability for her and her daughter. It was found that there were reasons beyond TfC’s control which prompted the changes in social worker and apologies were offered. The parent was also unhappy about some of the language and terms used in the report for the Initial Child Protection Conference which she found were not appropriate as they were about her appearance and presentation. It was recognised that the language used was not ideal and an apology was made. The complaint was resolved and did not escalate further.

8. STAGE TWO COMPLAINTS

8.1. In total 15 stage two complaints were received in Q1 and Q2. 7 of the complaints related to the SEND team. The other 8 complaints were 1 each for the Next Steps Team, Assessment Team, Connected Carers Team, Children with Disabilities Team, Early Help Team, Permanence Team, Child Protection Team and Transport Service in Education.

Themes:

8.2. The main themes are shown in the table below:



8.3. Six out of 15 complaints relate to SEND issues and three related to case management issues. This aligns with the top themes at stage one.

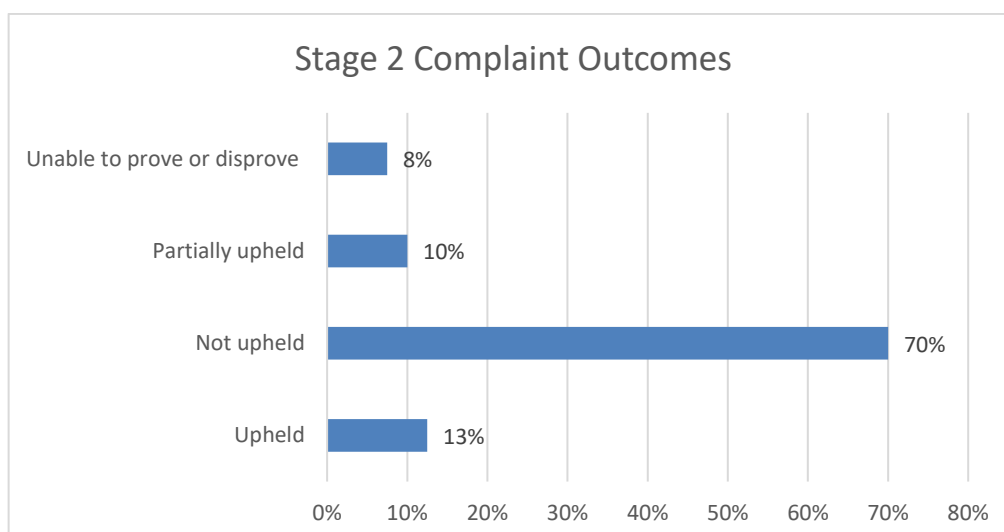
Timeliness of Response to Stage Two Complaints:

8.4. In the first six months of 2022-23, seven stage two complaints were concluded (*figures differ to numbers received, as there were complaints open at the start of the year from 2021/22 and complaints that remain open moving into 2022-23*). Three of the stage two complaints were completed within the 65-day timescale (43%). The average number of working days taken to complete stage 2 complaints in the first six months of this year is 33 days compared with 59.1 for the same period last year.

All 4 complaints that went out of timescale were corporate complaints which have a shorter timescale for investigation of 25 days. Given the complexity, the timescales needed to be extended. The Investigating Officers agreed with each customer an appropriate extension to allow sufficient time for the investigations. Notwithstanding the growing complexity of complaints, improving the timeliness of complaints remains an area of focus for the service.

Stage Two Complaint Outcomes

8.5. There were 40 elements of complaint identified within all stage two complaints that concluded in the first six months of 2023/24. The outcomes of the stage two complaint elements are shown below.



- 8.6. At stage two, the majority of complaint elements equating to 28 (70%) were not upheld and a further 8% were unable to prove or disprove. 10% of elements were partially upheld and 13% were upheld.
- 8.7. The main subject areas of elements upheld at stage two are as follows:
- One related to a lack of contact from the SEND Team.
 - One related to the SEND Team not communicating effectively.
 - One related to the SEND Team not adhering to parental preference in accordance with the Children and Families Act 2014
 - One related to a Social Worker speaking inappropriately about a parent.
 - One related to the SEND Team inappropriately naming an education provision in an Education Health Care Plan which is not available until September 2024.

An example of a stage two complaint (corporate):

A parent was unhappy that Together for Children (TfC) had inappropriately named an education provision in her son's Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) which was not available until September 2024. It was found that the final decision of the son's EHCP was looked at by a Resource Panel of professionals who checked the EHCP and agreed upon the final copy. Staff within the SEND team listened to the parent's feedback around the frustration she felt with regards to her son not starting the school until 2024 and they agreed that it is not an option they will offer parents moving forward. They could see how naming it on an EHCP could cause frustration and therefore has learned from this complaint and has put in steps to ensure this will not happen going forward. The parent also felt if TfC had organised a meeting with her sooner then it would have answered some of this complaint without having to take it to Stage 2. Following the complaint, the SEND Strategic Lead has reminded staff of the importance of communicating with parents when detailing their preferences before Resource Panel and of the importance of holding meetings with parents at the earliest opportunity.

9. OMBUDSMAN REFERRALS

- 9.1. There have been five complaints highlighted to the Customer Feedback Team by the Local Government Ombudsman so far this year; two were upheld, one was closed after initial enquiries, and two are in progress at the investigation stage.

10. COST OF COMPLAINTS

- 10.1. The total cost of investigating claims in the first two quarters of 2023/24 is £3,224 compared with £4,058 for the same period in 2022/23. All new complaints have been managed internally by the Customer Feedback Team with no external allocations.
- 10.2. So far this year the compensation costs paid in relation to upheld complaints has totalled £8,920.

£1,300 is in relation to a SEND complaint where elements were upheld by the Investigating Officer concerning how the service responded to initial concerns raised by Mam, the adequacy and timeliness of education provision for her son and the distress caused by the delay in issuing her son's amended EHCP plan. The complaint was escalated to the LGO and whilst the service offered a financial remedy of £500, the LGO recommended an additional payment of £500 given the length of delays and a further payment of £300 relating to the suitability of provision.

The remaining £7,620 is in relation to a financial remedy regarding a SEND stage 2 complaint. The Investigating Officer upheld the complaint because they found a school should have been consulted as parental preference for school for their son at the initial stages when appropriate. This would have avoided the action taken by the parent to enlist the services of a solicitor and spend a considerable sum doing so. As Together for Children failed to consult with parental preference in accordance with the Children and Families Act 2014, a financial remedy was agreed.

11. ABUSIVE, UNREASONABLE PERSISTENT OR VEXATIOUS COMPLAINANTS

11.1. In the first six months of this reporting period the Customer Feedback Manager has issued 3 letters to customers in relation to unreasonable persistent communication.

12. LEARNING & IMPROVEMENT

12.1. Below are some examples of learning and recommendations that have been implemented following the resolution of complaints:

- Relevant Officers and Team Managers within the Children with Disabilities Team are responding to a recommendation by working with a parent more on how they can better communicate the ways in which the service will be working with their son and what this will look like.
- Following concerns raised by a parent about who should attend her son's meetings, the young person's allocated worker has met with the young person and his advocate to seek his views about his meetings and who he would like to be in attendance. The worker, advocate and IRO has also helped the young person to better plan for his meetings to ensure he can be fully supported and have his views heard more easily.
- Together for Children have reminded all staff in Social Care through their learning and briefing platform, about the statutory requirements relating to care team meetings.
- The SEND Strategic Lead has reinforced to SEND workers the importance of communicating with parents when detailing their preferences before Resource Panel. She has also reminded workers of the importance of holding meetings with parents at the earliest opportunity.

13. SUMMARY

13.1. Together for Children are committed to getting it right for the families in Sunderland. To do this we continue to drive improvement from learning from the complaints and compliments raised. An action plan is maintained by the Customer Feedback Team which includes actions and recommendations from stage two investigations and stage three panels. The action plan is closely monitored by the team. Reminders are sent to managers with responsibility for the recommendations each month and reported into Senior Management Team meetings to ensure that the learning is shared across the whole service.

13.2. We have been working with services with a view to improving timeliness and responding more proactively to customer concerns. There is still work to do to improve timeliness. The majority of concerns are being resolved at an earlier stage and therefore customers are not having to proceed through the lengthier stages unnecessarily.

13.3. We are now part of a local arrangement for the recruitment of Independent Persons (IPs) for Stage two Children's Social Care complaints, working with Gateshead and South Tyneside local authorities. As a result of this arrangement, we are seeing a reduced delay in instigating the investigation process through a quicker appointment process. We have our own small pool of IPs who can undertake the IP role in Gateshead and South Tyneside authorities where workers will be able to see practice in neighbouring authorities and add to their experience, learning and knowledge. One of our Investigating Officers is doing a piece of work for South Tyneside Council to provide a report and recommendations to their Senior Leadership Team following a complaints investigation into a complex case.

13.4. The Customer Feedback Team implemented a complaints handling management system, Apteon Respond in May 2023. Our complaints data is now more accessible, can be reported more easily and assists with workflow management within the team. The system provides greater insight into the identification of themes and areas for learning and improvement.

13.5. In response to the increase in complaint numbers and escalations, work will be carried out to look at the reasons for escalation from initial contacts to Stage 1, and from Stage 1 to 2 to see if any work can be done to resolve

issues at an earlier stage. This review will consider the complexity of concerns raised by parents that may be partly responsible for the increased escalations together with the ability to communicate effectively with some families who have received letters from the service with regards to persistent complaints and unacceptable behaviour.