

**Together for Children  
Customer Feedback Six Month Summary Report  
April 2025 - September 2025**



## HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY

### What are our key achievements?

- We have received 101 compliments so far this year from children, young people, families, and professionals.
- We have successfully helped 71 customers to receive satisfactory resolutions to their queries, issues or concerns informally, without having to initiate a complaint.
- We have seen much improved timeliness for Stage 2 complaints responding to 88.9% of complaints within timescale compared with 53.8% in the same period last year.

### What are our areas of focus?

- Working with services to explore potential reasons for the increase in the number of complaints received.
- Continued focus on improving the timeliness of complaints at stage 1.

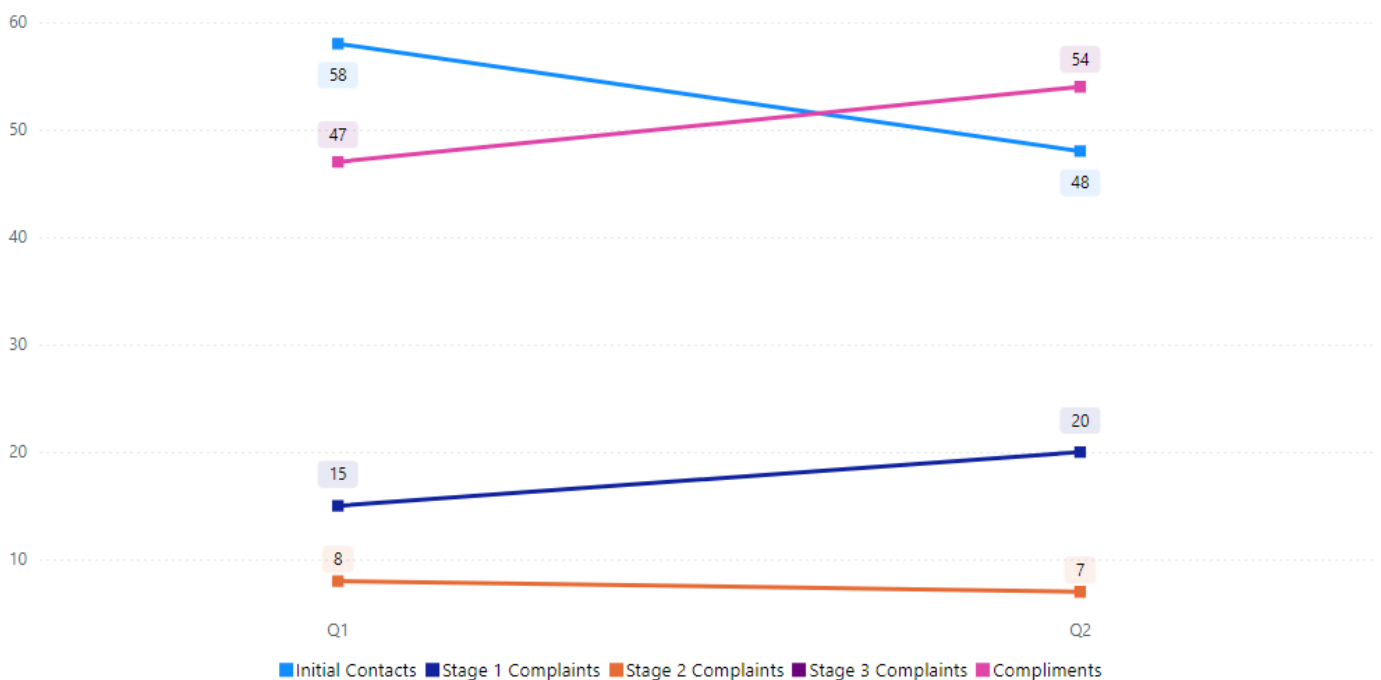
## 1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1. This report covers the period 1<sup>st</sup> April to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2025. 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.

Feedback Summary



## 3. COMPLIMENTS

- 3.1. We have received 101 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:

### Assessment Team

The social worker from the assessment team was really thorough. She got a good understanding of the worries and had a really clear and direct approach with the family whilst still being empathetic and supportive.

### Social Care Business Admin

I wanted to share that Marc has been very helpful in arranging a reasonable adjustment for a disabled member of staff. Kind and proactive as ever.

### **Business Intelligence**

The report looks so good and very exciting for what more we could have in the future, thanks Sarah for all your hard work on this.

### **Cared for Team**

X was spoken to as part of the audit moderation process. When asked about his social worker Trina he responded 'aye, she is cushty', he said she is a really good social worker and he gets on well with her. X said that Trina helps him by taking him to his appointments with CYPS and other people that he wouldn't have gone to before. X said that she helps him understand things which he hasn't understood before. X said that his life is now loads calmer and he is getting on loads better with his Mam and family.

### **Child Protection Teams**

This has been a very life transforming journey for me. A few months ago I was broke, broken, homeless, rejected by all, ashamed, failed, very depressed, lost, hopeless, helpless, worthless, abused, and taken advantage of by people I loved. I lost the essence of living when I lost my only joy left, my child. I decided to take my life, before I was reassigned to these beautiful souls who saved my life.

You all gave me guidance, encouragement, and a shoulder to lean on. Most of all, you all gave me hope that I can have another chance to live again.

This amazing team worked their way through with me in putting up an amazing support network for me, who were willing to care and support me from baby steps to big steps. Thank you so much. You believed in me and refused to give up on me. Thank you so much for your encouragement, support and care for me and X. I am still a work-in-progress, healing and being an awesome mam to X. Thank you all for the outstanding team effort. You all are the real deal. TFC Rocks!

### **Children with Disabilities**

Mam wanted to share that she thinks social care have been amazing. She said it really irks her when people complain online and she knows that often we get negative feedback, so she wanted to give a positive. She said we're all lovely!

### **CIRT**

I just want to share some lovely feedback from Mam. She was understandably anxious about the RCPC today as she always feels uncomfortable in meetings like this however I spoke to her afterwards. Mam shared that she is really pleased that Emma has been the IRO as she has found her to be really supportive and understanding. Mam found the meeting went well and it relieved some of her anxieties, the way it was managed particularly with the difference in recommendations from the professionals. Mam said "Emma is amazing" and she wanted me to feed this back, how lovely!

### **Clinical Psychologist**

I just wanted to say a huge thank you for all of your support throughout X's time with us. We really appreciate you giving up your time to offer advice and strategies to help us to guide her through some difficult times. I am sure our paths will cross again in the future but I just wanted you to know how much we have appreciated you and how much of a difference you helped make.

### **Fostering**

I got excellent support from my Fostering Social Worker and advocates have been great for the boys as well as keeping me in informed and asking my views.

X reports having a strong working relationship with Mick Gifford who has been her Fostering Social Worker for 8 years and appreciates the consistency of support this has provided which Jean described as "brilliant".

### **Kinship Team**

Kirsten is my social worker who has done all of my assessments and I would just like to say what a social worker she is - she's amazing. She is very friendly and down to earth. She made me feel really comfortable from her very first visit and X just loves her. She is very professional and gave me some great advice. She was always on the other end of the phone and I did need to ring her a few times for advice. We will really miss her.

### **Next Steps**

Thank you card received from Grandad for Julie. 'Just to say thank you for all your support. We appreciate how difficult your role is when working with such difficult young people.'

### **Supported Lodgings**

I would like to compliment and congratulate the team working at Marlow Drive. Their dedication and hard work have seen the person they support thrive. They have gone above and beyond in their roles, they have ensured person centred care and support that is kind, compassionate and the young person is at the fore of all they do. The team have experienced some tough times; but their strength, care and dedication has got them through. They have remained focussed on the success of the young person, supported one another throughout, this has included SALT, CYPS too; as well as a great management team too.

### **Early Help**

I just wanted to say a huge thank you — today I visited the children's sensory room at the Bunnyhill centre with my toddler for the first time like you recommended, and it was absolutely amazing! I'm honestly so impressed. X loved it too — he was so excited and happy. It was very easy to find, and the staff there were incredibly friendly. Honestly, just wonderful. I asked at the pharmacy where it was, and a lovely girl from there actually walked me straight to the place. I have no words — truly, thank you so much again. X came home full of joy and went to sleep peacefully, without a fuss. Thank you again from the bottom of my heart. I always get quite anxious when I go to a new place because of the language barrier. I worry about how I'll communicate and how people will react to the fact that I don't speak English well — in fact, I barely speak it at all. But this time, I didn't face any difficulties at all. Everything felt so welcoming and kind. Even during my pregnancy, I had a few issues at the clinic before, but here it was completely different.

Everyone was so helpful. For example, I didn't even ask for help, but the lady at reception noticed I wasn't sure where the sensory room was — and she kindly took me by the hand and guided me there herself. It was such a small gesture, but it meant a lot to me. I really didn't feel any discomfort, and I'm very grateful for that.

### **Targeted Youth Services**

Mam has praised the support offered from Andy and felt going through this difficult time since December has made things easier with the support Andy has offered. X has no male role model in his life and he speaks positively of the support and training Andy has offered, he has built up a positive professional relationship with Andy and I think this has really helped him build upon his self-confidence and esteem.

### **Education**

As a parent, I wish to recognise the outstanding support and guidance that one of your caseworkers, Julie Armstrong, has consistently provided. Julie has supported my daughter as her caseworker, on and off over a number of years due to placement changes. Throughout this time, she has been consistently courteous, professional, and—most importantly—genuinely human in her approach. She takes the time to truly understand challenges, offers thoughtful guidance, and always sees my child as an individual rather than just a name within the system. Her modesty, true integrity, and selfless commitment to supporting others shine through in all she does. Julie remembers key details, recognises struggles, and works proactively to find solutions—where in the past, some might have seen only barriers. Most recently, she also stepped in to support my son's EHCP after a colleague left. True to form, she immediately made things happen, communicated effectively, and followed up with care and diligence. Julie is an exemplary caseworker who represents Sunderland SEN Department in the very best light. Her professionalism, empathy, and dedication are deeply valued, and I feel it is important that her contribution is acknowledged at a wider level. With thanks and appreciation.

### **Customer Feedback Team**

Compliment from member of staff - Thank you Dawn for making me feel comfortable when sharing my views.

## 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	58	48	106	-
Resolved as Initial Contact	43	28	71	67%
Progressed to Stage 1	15	20	35	33%

- 4.2. We have received 106 initial contacts in the last six months compared to 123 for the same period in the previous year. Through responding to contacts at the outset, we have helped 71 (67%) of our customers to receive satisfactory responses and resolutions informally with 35 contacts (33%) progressing to a formal stage one complaint.

### An example of an initial contact:

A parent was aware of the recent changes relating to the care of the sons of her ex-partner. Although she did not have parental responsibility, her daughter was missing having contact with the boys as they had a close relationship. The Team Manager made contact and followed up with arrangements to attempt to facilitate family time and maintain communication. The parent was satisfied with the response and the complaint did not escalate.

## 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 to 20 working days.

- **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 20 working days: however, an extension can be requested for more complex cases up to 40 working days.

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	7	11	18	+5	8	9	17	+3	15	20	35	+8
Stage 2	5	5	10	+4	3	2	5	-	8	7	15	+4
Stage 3	0	0	0	-1	N/A	N/A	-	-	0	0	0	-1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>+8</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>+3</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>+11</b>

- 6.1. **Overall Total (all stages)** - In the first six months of the year we received 50 complaints compared with 39 in the same period of 2024/25, which is an overall increase of 11.
- 6.2. **Stage One Complaints** – we have received 18 Children’s Social Care stage one complaints compared with 13 for the same period in 2024/25. We also saw an increase in the number of corporate stage one complaints, receiving 17 compared with 14 in the same period last year.
- 6.3. **Stage two Complaints** – we have received 10 children’s social care stage two complaints compared with 6 in 2024/25. We also received 5 corporate stage two complaints compared with 5 in 2024/25.
- 6.4. **Stage three Complaints (Children’s social care)** – no complaints have progressed to stage three.

### Number of Complaints by Young People:

- 6.5. There were no 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.

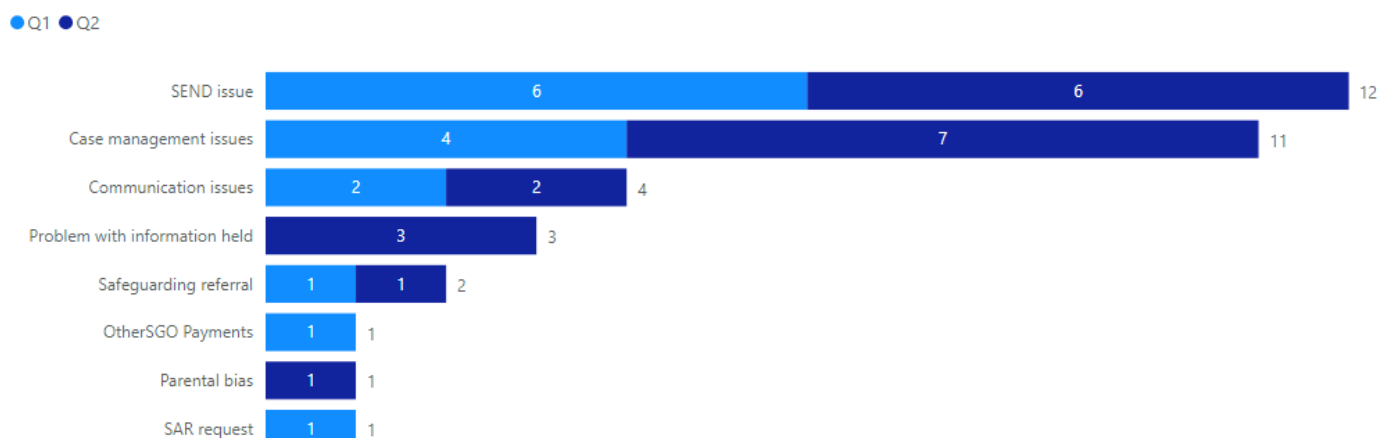
TEAM	No Stage 1 Complaints	% Stage 1 Complaints
SEND Team	13	37.1%
Assessment Teams	4	11.4%
Kinship Team	3	8.6%
Adoption Team	2	5.7%
Cared for Teams	2	5.7%
Child Protection Teams	2	5.7%
Children with Disabilities Teams	2	5.7%
Early Help	2	5.7%
Education	1	2.9%
Fostering Team	1	2.9%
ICRT	1	2.9%
Pre-Birth Team	1	2.9%
Education - Transport	1	2.9%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100%</b>

7.2. 13 complaints received in the first six months relate to the SEND team with 4 complaints following for the Assessment Teams. Overall, we have seen some new areas of complaint within the first 6 months of this year which accounts for the increase in overall complaint numbers. Work will be undertaken with services to understand the reasons for the increase.

**Themes:**

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

No. of Stage 1 by Theme



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

**Timeliness of Response to Stage One Complaints:**

7.5. In the first six months of 2025/26, 28 of the 35 stage one complaints were concluded. 43% were completed in timescale which has decreased from 56.52% the previous year. Out of the 16 complaints over timescale, 10 were completed within a further 10 days.

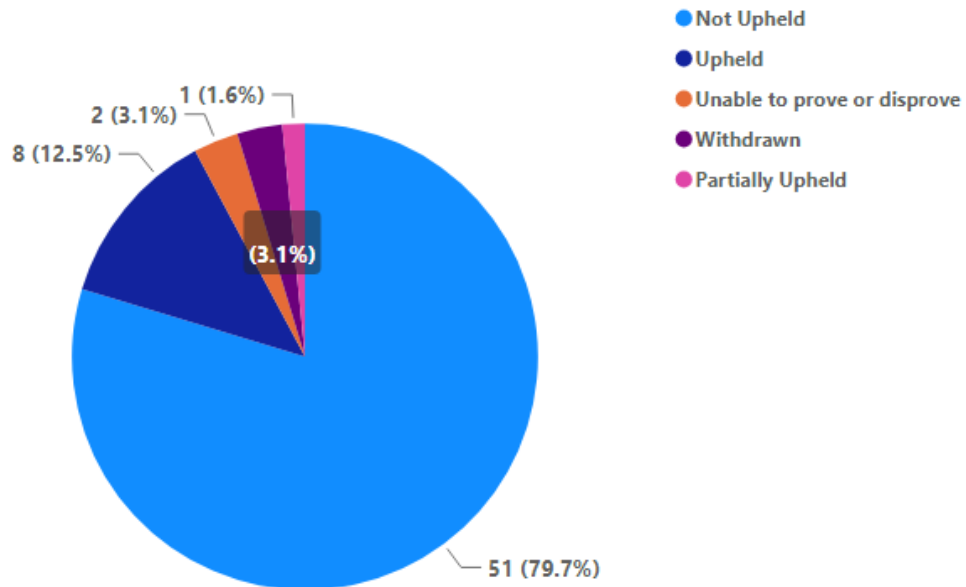
% of all stage 1 complaints responded to in timescale	Q1	Q2	Overall
	56% (5 out of 9)	37% (7 out of 19)	43% (12 out of 28)

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. So far this year, we have received eight more Stage 1 complaints than during the same period last year, which has affected our quarter two response times. We continue to work closely with the Tfc teams to identify ways to meet the 10 and 20-working-day timescales, even during periods of peak demand.

**Stage One Complaint Outcomes:**

7.7. There were 64 elements of complaint identified within stage one complaints that were concluded in the first six months of 2025-26. The outcomes of those stage one complaint elements are shown below.

## Stage 1 Complaint Element Outcomes



- 7.8. Of the 64 elements of complaint, 51 were not upheld (79.7%). Only 8 elements (12.5%) were upheld, a further 1 element (1.6%) was partially upheld. Of the 8 upheld elements, 4 related to SEND issues, 2 were communication issues, 1 was a case management issue and 1 related to advice regarding SGO payments.

### An example of a stage one corporate complaint:

A parent made a complaint that Together for Children had advised her to continue with a tribunal to challenge a school placement decision. Other elements to the complaint included that the child had not been in a school placement for a few months and the parent felt there was no explanation given by the SEND Team as to why a school had been suggested which was not suitable for the child's needs. The matter was discussed with the SEND Team Manager and it was deemed that the information provided by the SEND Team about the tribunal process was not given inappropriately or done in a way to suggest that it was compulsory. The tribunal process includes discussions around why the school named in the EHCP was chosen and this had been discussed in this case. The decision for the child to be out of school was deemed to have been the parent's decision and not to do with the decisions made by the SEND Team. All 3 elements to the complaint were not upheld.

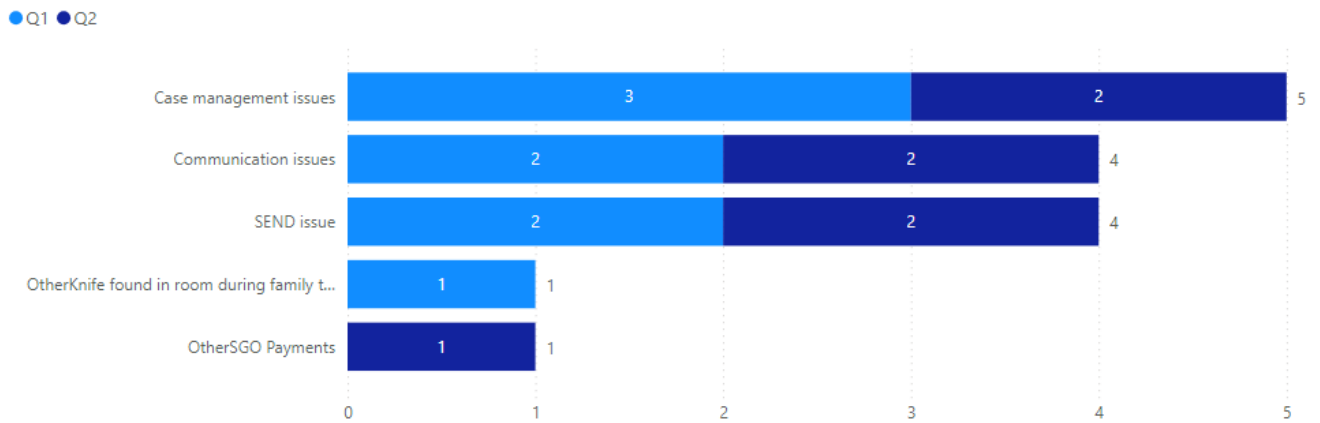
## 8. STAGE TWO COMPLAINTS

- 8.1. In total 15 stage two complaints were received in Q1 and Q2. 5 of the complaints related to the SEND team and 3 complaints related to the Assessment Teams. 2 of the complaints related to the Adoption Team and 2 related to the Kinship Team. The other 3 complaints were 1 each for the Early Help Team, Pre-Birth Team and Cared for Team.

### Themes:

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

### No. of Stage 2 by Theme



8.3. 5 out of 15 complaints relate to case management issues, 4 relate to communication issues and 4 relate to SEND issues.

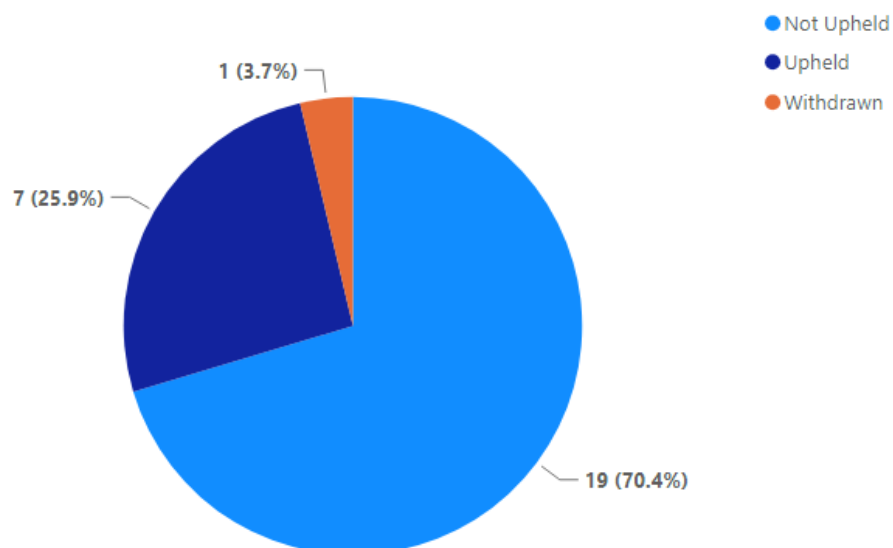
#### Timeliness of Response to Stage Two Complaints:

8.4. In the first six months of 2025-26, 9 stage two complaints were concluded (*figures differ to numbers received, as there were complaints open at the start of the year from 2024/25 and complaints that remain open moving into 2025-26*). 8 of the stage two complaints were completed within the 65-day timescale (88.9%). The average number of working days taken to complete stage 2 complaints in the first six months of this year is 41 days compared with 55 for the same period last year. The 1 complaint that went out of timescale was a corporate complaint and this was completed 7 days over timescale.

#### Stage Two Complaint Outcomes

8.5. There were 27 elements of complaint identified within all stage two complaints that concluded in the first six months of 2025/26. The outcomes of the stage two complaint elements are shown below.

Stage 2 Complaint Element Outcomes



8.6. At stage two, most complaint elements equating to 19 (70.4%) were not upheld and 7 (25.9%) were upheld. The 7 elements of complaint that were upheld related to communication, safeguarding concerns and case management issues.

**An example of a stage two complaint (statutory):**

A parent made a complaint regarding ineffective communication and inaccurately recording information. TfC acknowledged the frustration around not being contacted by a service area when others were able to make contact separately. The service reflected on better practice for future efforts, and a reminder was sent to staff to double check information held on our internal management system.

It was found that information recorded in an assessment was correctly taken from a referral and captured the children's views appropriately and that parent's views were also accurately captured as part of the assessment. TfC were however quick to amend an error highlighted within a parent's family tree.

**An example of a stage two complaint (corporate):**

Parents complained that TfC failed to consult straight away with their parental preference for a school within the local area and failed to issue an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) within timescale. The service explained that as per the SEND Code of Practice 2015, it states that if the school is found to not be suitable for the needs of the child, then Together for Children do not have to consult immediately with the parental choice. TfC did go on to consult with a number of schools, including parental preference, which ultimately was not suitable for the child. TfC did confirm that they went beyond the statutory timescale for issuing an EHCP and a remedy was offered in line with Local Government Ombudsman guidance.

## 9. OMBUDSMAN REFERRALS

9.1. There have been 5 complaints highlighted to the Customer Feedback Team by the Local Government Ombudsman so far this year:

- 3 complaints were not investigated.
- 1 complaint was upheld identifying fault and injustice caused. TfC issued an apology in writing, paid £5,500, and provided a summary report to the LGO of the action taken to ensure alternative support is provided when a placement breaks down.
- 1 complaint was upheld identifying fault for causing a delay when deciding the support needed for the child's special educational needs. The LGO agreed that Together for Children had offered suitable remedies at Stage 2.

## 10. COST OF COMPLAINTS

10.1. The total cost of investigating claims in the first two quarters of 2025/26 is £955 compared with £3,921 for the same period in 2024/25. All complaints are 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 £8,200.00 in relation to 6 SEND complaints, compared with £8,360.54 paid in the same period last year in relation to 2 SEND complaints.

## 11. ABUSIVE, UNREASONABLE PERSISTENT OR VEXATIOUS COMPLAINANTS

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

## 12. LEARNING & IMPROVEMENT

12.1. Below are some areas where learning has been taken from complaints and messages or processes have been reinforced following the resolution of complaints:

- A senior manager led on the implementation of an emergency protocol in the event children suffer accidents or sudden illnesses during family time sessions. A representative of Together for Children is identified to take appropriate action in the event a child is injured and report the matter to both parents immediately.
- The message was reinforced with Social Care Team Managers that teams should provide parents with copies of Child and Family assessments in a timely manner and offer to discuss the contents with them to ensure transparency and understanding.
- Social Care Team Managers reminded Social Workers of the importance of recording all details of direct work with children.
- Social Care Team Managers reminded Social Workers of the importance of including relevant family in all meetings related to their child.

### 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, in particular at Stage 1.
- 13.3. We are 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.
- 13.4. Work will continue to 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. These reviews will consider the complexity of concerns raised by parents.