

Statutory Childrens Social Care Annual Report

Complaints and Customer Feedback

For the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025



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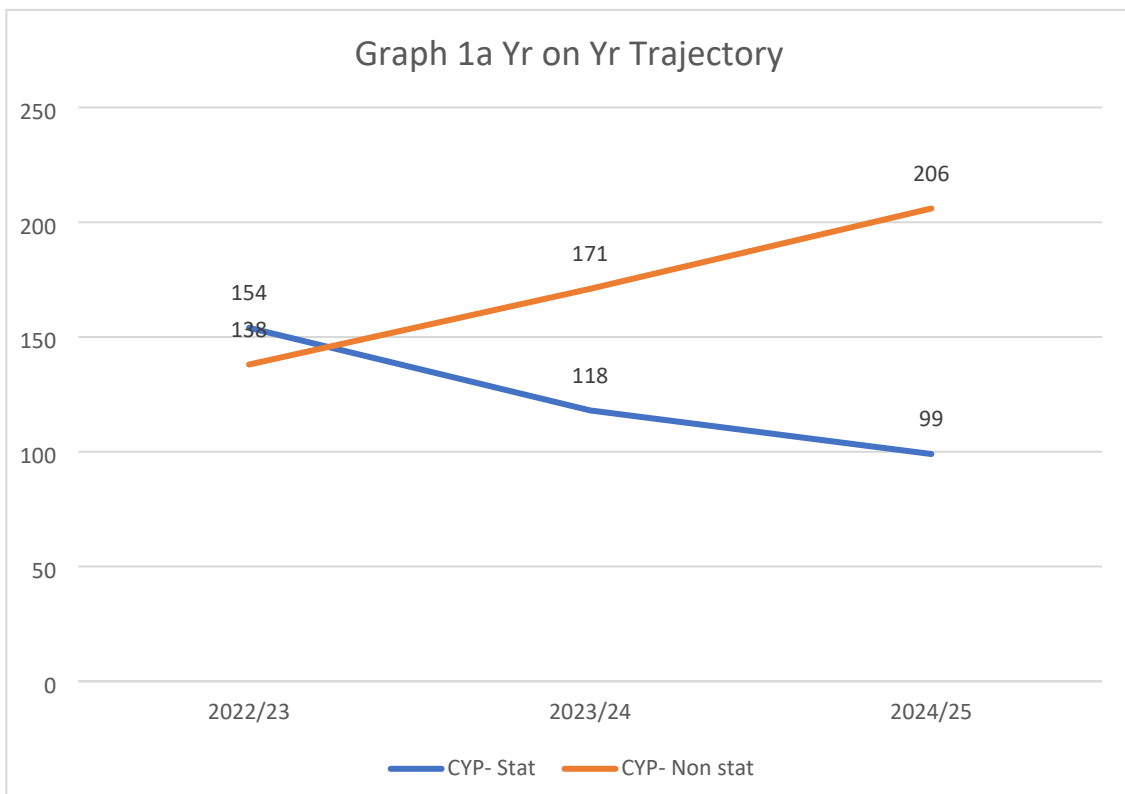
1. Executive Summary

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 2024/25 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 24 complaints (7.3%) were made directly by children.

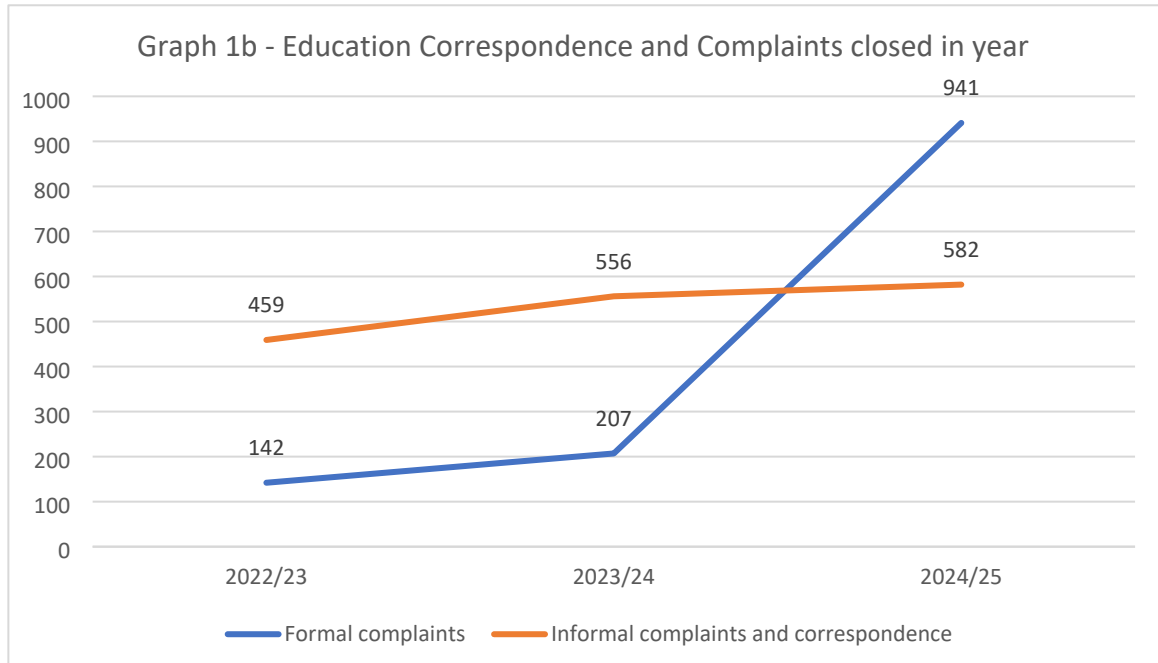
Graph 1a below shows:

- Statutory children's social care (CSC) complaints by children and those with parental responsibility, decreased by 16% from 118 in 2023/24 to 99 in 2024/25.
- Non statutory children's social care complaints went up from 171 to 206, an increase of 18%. We have seen an increase in other family members complaining since the year before.



Graph 1b shows:

- Corporate formal complaints about children with special educational needs and education matters went up by 355% from 207 to 941. The reasons for this rise will be explored in section 3.2.
- Corporate informal complaints about children with special educational needs and education matters and associated correspondence, went up from 556 to 582, an increase of 5%.



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 over half of all referrals.

CSC received 91 compliments in 2024/25, and 58 compliments were made in relation to SEND / Education services, making a total of 149 overall for Children's Services. This is a slight decrease from 153 in 2023/24.

The total amount spent on external independent investigations for children's complaints was £12,006.65 (an increase of £2,324.05 on 2023/24 costs). This reflects the increase of number of stage 2 investigations from 3 to 6. A total of £2,800 was paid out in Ombudsman children's social care final decisions for 2024/25.

2 Background

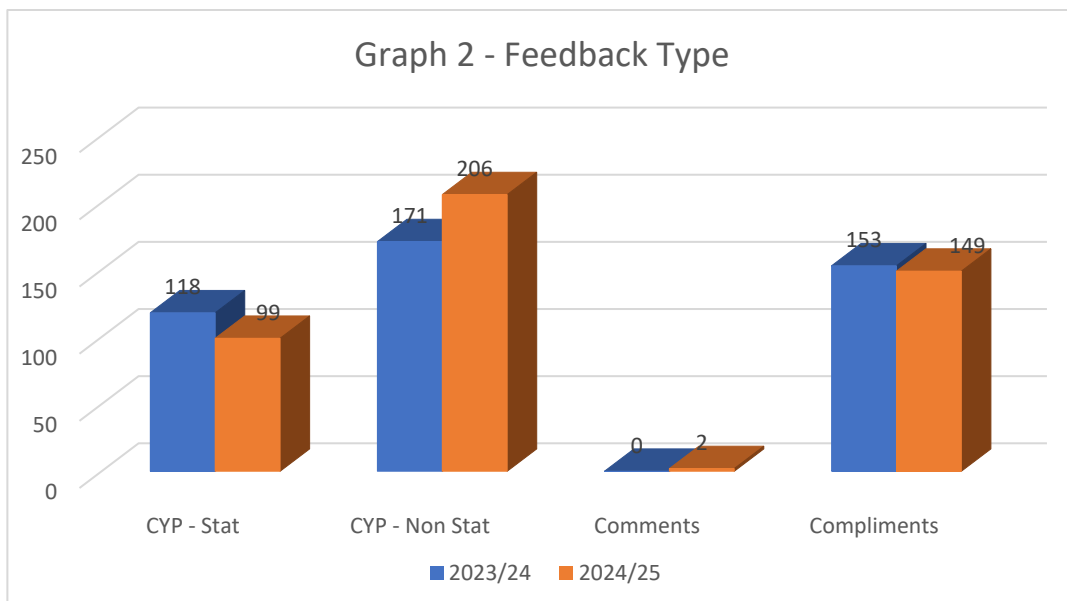
There is a statutory and non-statutory procedure for complaints about children's and



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 designated complaints manager for the service. 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 2024/25 the total amount spent on external independent investigations for children's complaints was £12,006.65 which is an increase in costs from the previous year reflecting the increase in investigations.

Graph 2 shows a welcome decrease of 16% in CSC statutory complaints which decreased by 16%, to make an overall total of 99 for 2024/25. The decrease in complaints is probably because of more work being done to resolve complaints at the early resolution stage.

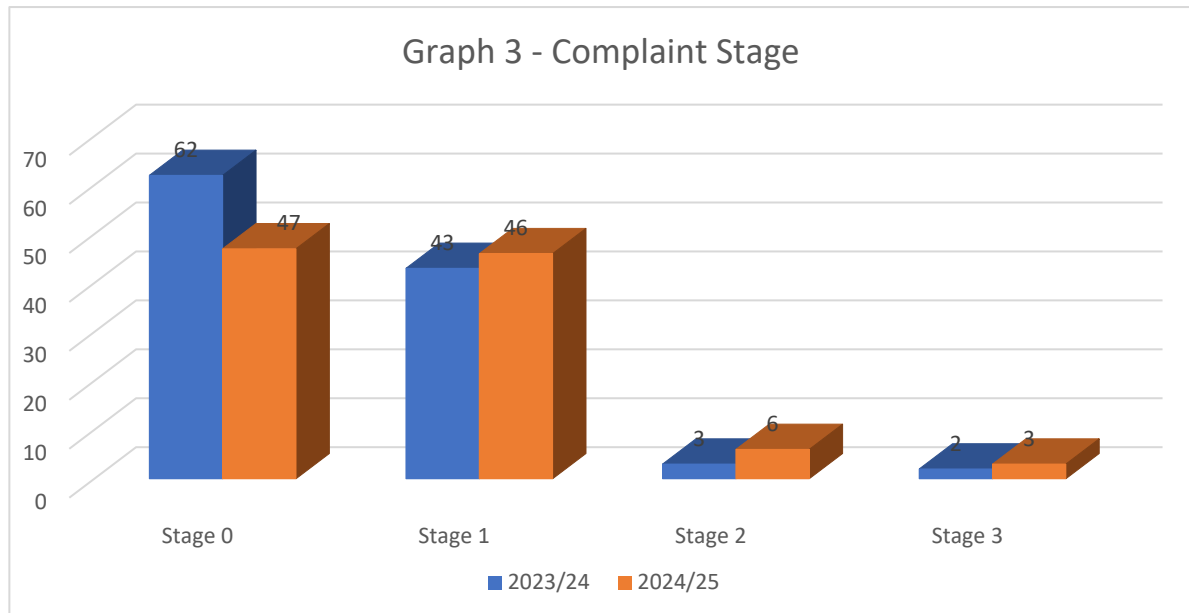
Most CSC complaints are made by parents or guardians. Only 24 complaints were made directly by children in 2024/25 (7.3%). Complaints made by children are prioritised for immediate attention and advocates are provided to help give children a voice.



2.1 Breakdown of complaints by stage

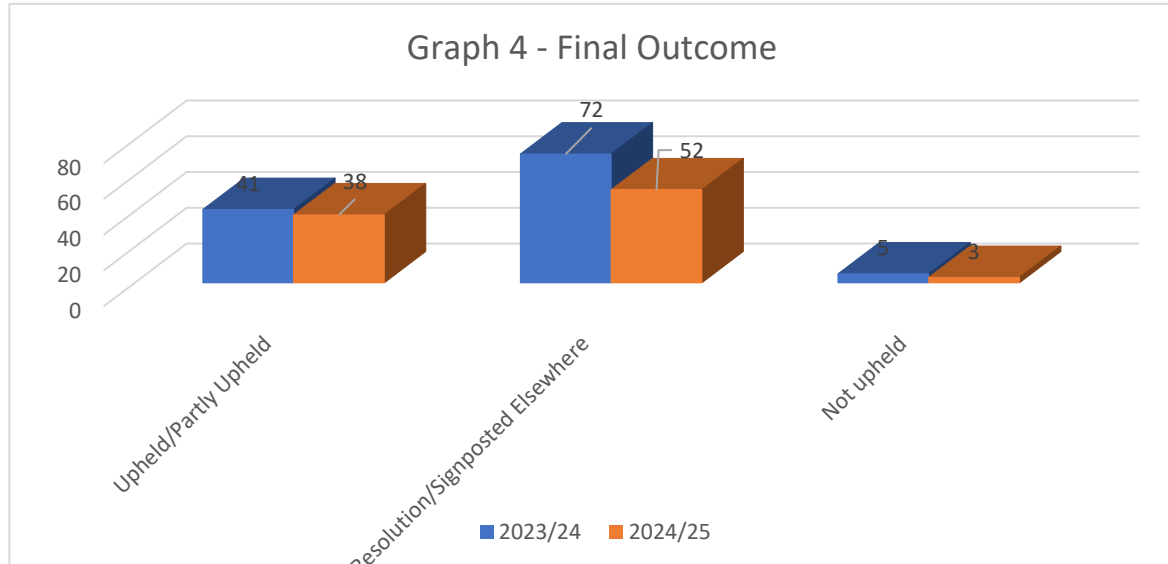
The breakdown of complaints with outcomes recorded against them can be seen in Graph 3. Stage 0 is the early resolution of complaints.





2.2 Breakdown of complaints by outcome

Graph 4 shows a breakdown of the 93 closed statutory complaints which had a final outcome recorded at the time of writing this report. Of these 3% were not upheld, 41% were upheld or partly upheld and most complaints (56%) were signposted, resolved early or withdrawn.



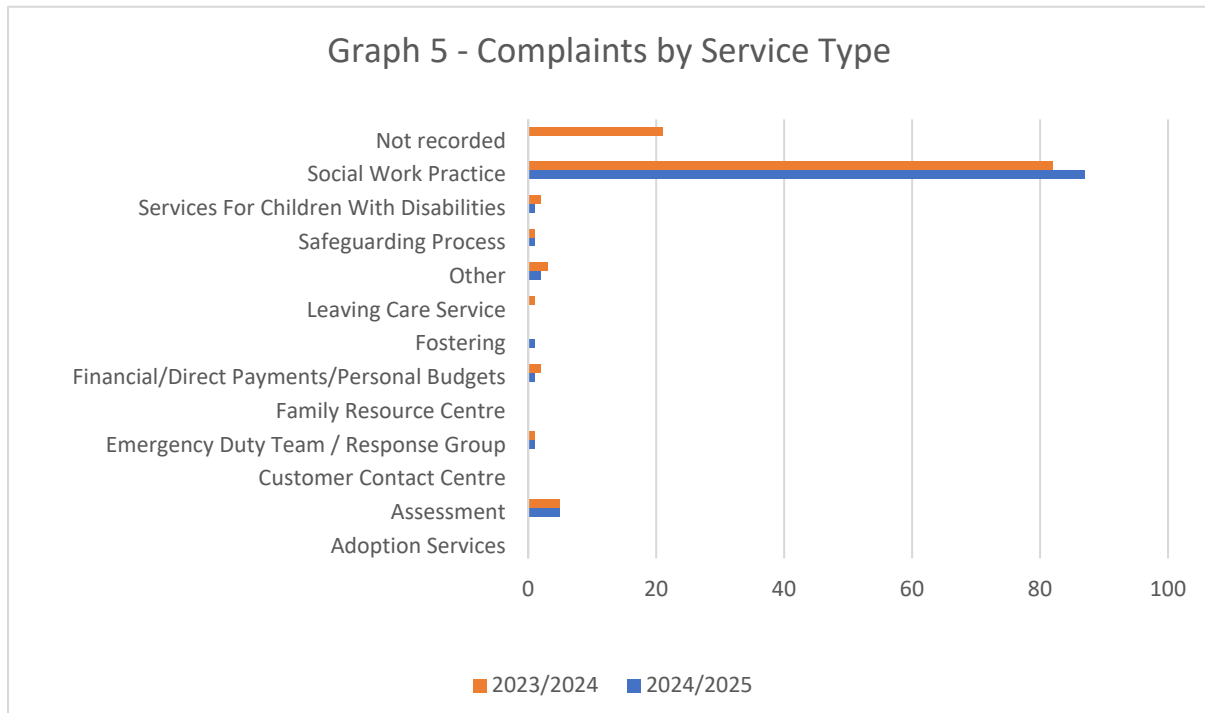
Of the total number of both statutory & non-statutory CSC complaints received, 185 exceeded statutory timescales at Stages 0 to 2 (20 working days) which is a rate of 56.5%. In 2023/24 there were 195 breached complaints, so there has been a slight decrease. Improvements have been made to the recording 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.



The main complaint themes include staff not communicating well with families, the transitions process, not working in joined up ways with internal colleagues and external organisations.

2.4 Thematic Learning

In Appendix 1, learning from complaints and improvements to social care provision is presented in a 'You said we did' format, according to the following themes.

- Improving relationships with families
- Reflection and Training
- Communication
- Reviewing and Improving Processes, Policies, and Procedures

3 Summary of non-statutory complaints

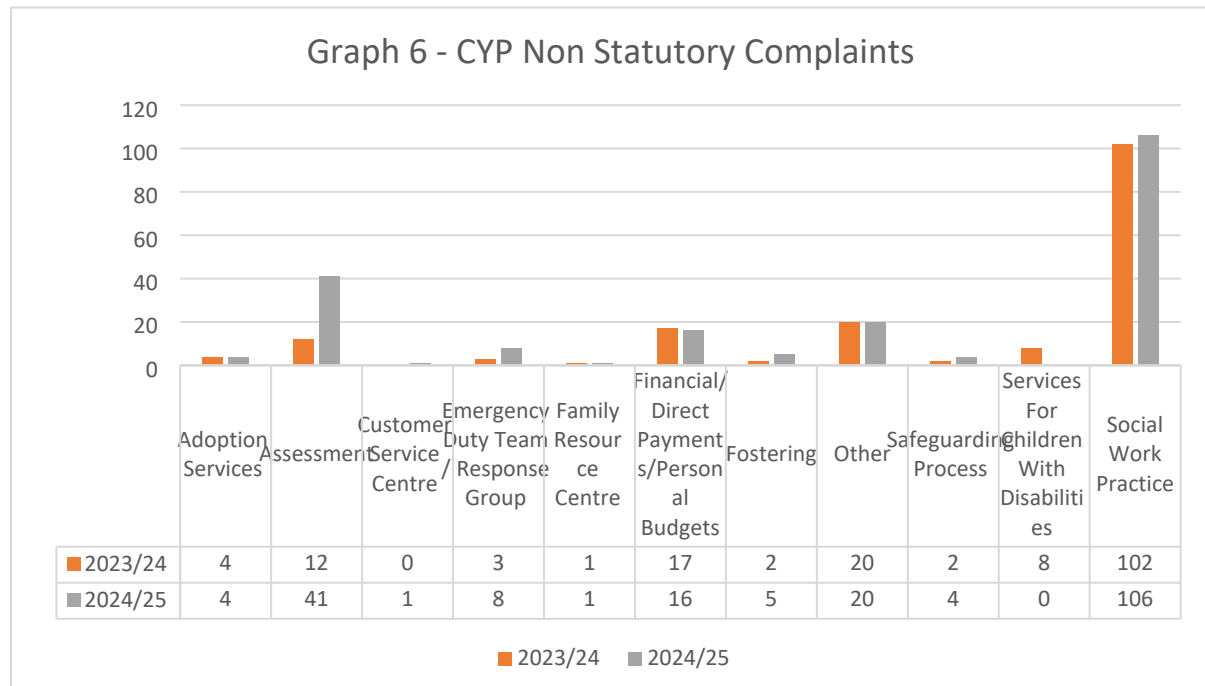
Non-CSC statutory social care complaints are made by a people who are **not** entitled to complain under the Children Act procedures (for example a family friend or a relative



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 171 in 23/24 to 206 in 24/25. The main theme is **social work practice**.



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 (EHC plan). National pressures are currently at unprecedented levels. Formal inclusion complaints went up by 355% from 207 to 941 overall, with 724 Stage 1's and 217 Stage 2 complaints.

The increase in complaints reflects both the scale of challenge and the visibility of the service.

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 are not just numbers—they represent real families and children who have not received the service they deserve.

3.3 Listening, improving and next steps

Senior managers are informed of the themes and learning from complaints and the Compliance and Assurance Board offers a governance role, to oversee improvements.

SEND improvements

The council will have invested a total £10.6m in SEND and Education Services by the end of the financial year 25/26. Staffing capacity has risen from 250 full time equivalent officers in 2023/24 to 320 full time equivalent officers in 2025/26. This is an increase of 28%, which is reducing the waiting times for assessments and reviews. It is expected that the backlog for SEND assessments will be cleared by late spring 2026.

The following actions have taken place in 2024/25:

- A comprehensive recovery plan to address delays in EHC assessments and annual reviews,
- 1,200 Educational Psychology assessments commissioned and an additional 1,200 requested,
- The backlog was reduced for first time in June 2025,
- Investing in sufficiency—expanding SEND units from 16 to 276 since 2021,
- Increasing special school places by nearly 500 in the last two years from 3,336 (2023) to 3,820 (2025),
- A new communication strategy co-developed with the Parent Carer Forum,
- Working with schools to improve mainstream inclusion; and,
- SEND staff training in complaints and statutory duties.

As communication has been a major theme in complaints, the service is co-developing a new strategy with families and launching an EHC Plan dashboard to improve transparency.

Although the recovery plan and strategic investments are in place and beginning to show an impact, it is accepted that sustained effort and engagement are still required to restore trust and meet statutory obligations. Managers are working with schools to build confidence in mainstream inclusion and developing resources to help families understand what they can expect. Managers are embedding learning from every

complaint, through staff training, better systems, and a new digital platform to improve how we respond.

In 2025/26, as the service is committed to restoring trust and delivering the inclusive, timely, and high-quality support that every child deserves, managers will:

- Maintain productivity to reduce backlog
- Secure funding for additional EP assessments
- Finalise and launch EHC Plan dashboard
- Bring the SEND capital plan to Cabinet in October
- Continue staff training and communication improvements

Childrens Social Care improvements

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 2025/26 CSC officers 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 share the main findings of the complaints reports and hold conversations around what good communication looks like in various circumstances.
- 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.

All improvements across services will be monitored by the Compliance and Assurance Board.



4. Compliments

As shown in Graph 2, there was a small reduction in positive feedback, with a total of 149 compliments made for all children's social care and education services.

4.1 Themes

There was positive feedback for the SEND helpline, with sentiments such as "every time they are really helpful".

Positive feedback was received for many case workers and social workers. An analysis of those themes shows that this feedback relates to:

- Staff communication and doing as they said they will do,
- Staff working in joined-up ways with other organisations,
- Staff being prepared to go the extra mile, being caring and kind, and
- Staff professionalism, knowledge, values and ethics.

4.2 Word Cloud

Please see Appendix 2 for examples of compliments made. The word cloud below is taken from the compliments included on pages 20 and 21.



5. Ombudsman Complaints

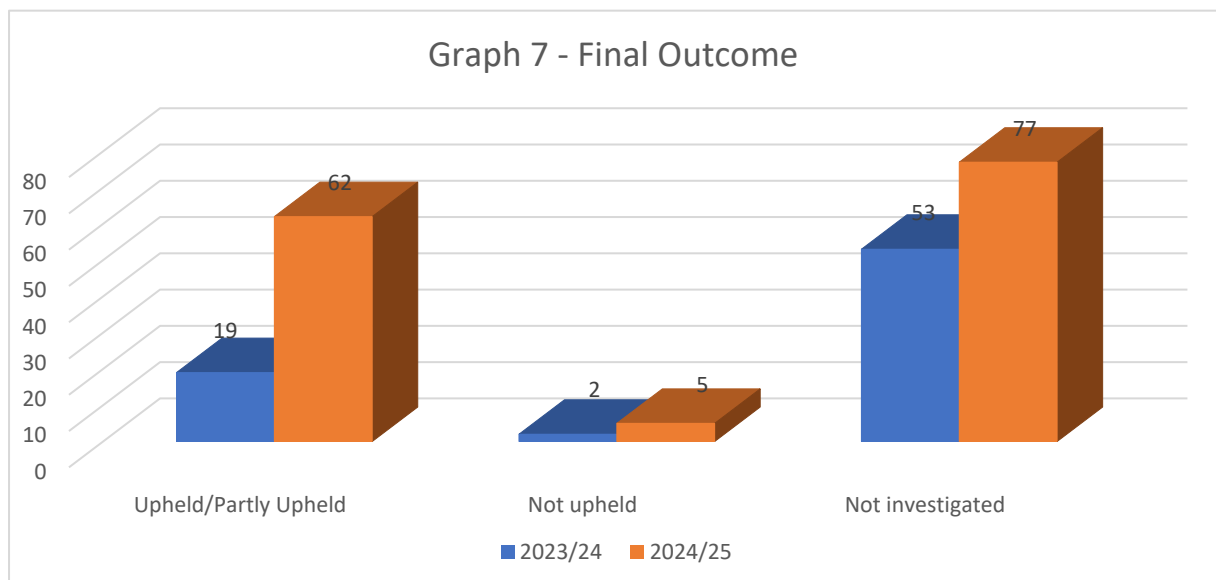
The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman acts as the regulator and provides the final stage for complaints about local authorities and some other organisations providing local public services. Their service is provided free of charge.

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 2024/25 the Ombudsman received a total of 162 separate enquiries in relation to CSC, Inclusion and Education Services (including school appeals) in Lancashire. (In 2023/24 it was 87.) There were 41 separate enquiries in relation to CSC, 117 in relation to Inclusion and Education Services (and 4 in relation to including school appeals) in Lancashire.

A total of 144 decisions were made by the Ombudsman in 2024/25 for these services compared with 74 in 2023/24. This is an overall rise of 49% in complaint investigations.

Graph 7 below shows a breakdown by outcome of the 144 Ombudsman CSC decisions received. The Ombudsman was satisfied overall with council actions in 57% of cases as 82 cases were not upheld or not investigated. However, in 43% of decisions maladministration was found and most of these were for Education / SEND related complaints. Of the 62 upheld decisions, 54 cases were SEND/ Education matters (87%).



6. Learning from Ombudsman complaints

As a result of the learning from the Ombudsman complaint decisions the following actions have been completed:



- a. Many Educational Health and Care Plans and assessments have been prioritised.
- b. Staff training has been provided at service development days.
- c. Officers have been reminded about the role of the panel deciding the sufficiency, or otherwise, of private educational psychology reports.
 - We must provide clear, understandable explanations about decisions of the sufficiency of private EP reports to those who send them, in support of applications for EHC plans.
 - When panels make their considerations, they must clearly record the problem and identify what extra evidence is needed and communicate this to parents / guardians using plain English and no jargon.
- d. A SEND action plan has been developed to improve services, and progress is being monitored by the Compliance and Assurance Board.
- e. More staff have been recruited to support SEND casework.
- f. Guidance for officers, has been compiled and revised in relation to:
 - Meeting EHCP statutory timescales.
 - Education of children who are out of school.
 - Keeping electronic records up to date, especially if a case worker goes off sick or is on holiday.
 - Double-checking notes and information carefully.
 - If the electronic record is not clear, staff must approach the case worker / manager and ask them to update the record.
- g. Staff have been reminded that it is incorrect to consider that because a child is on roll at a school, or receiving part time education, that the council does not have to fund alternative or full-time provision. The statutory guidance specifically states we must arrange suitable full-time education for children of compulsory school age who would not receive suitable education without such provision. This applies whether the child is on the admission register of a school or not and whatever type of school they attend.
- h. In several complaints, which were wrongly responded to by County Councillors or as MP enquiries, instead of using the corporate complaints procedure, staff have been reminded to signpost into the formal process and not to use the enquires system.
- i. In several complaints which significantly breached timescales, staff have been reminded to prioritise and respond to complaints within 20 working days at Stage 1 and within 20 working days at Stage 2
- j. Bespoke SEND complaints training has been commissioned for SEND staff



- k. The Complaints and Appeals Team have been granted one temporary additional business support post to manage SEND complaints.
- l. A new digital solution is being progressed to pull together all council feedback into one recording system to support an improvement to timescales in dealing with Stage 1 complaints from 20 working days to 15 days from 1 April 2026.

A total of £95,372 was paid out in final decisions for 2024/25, although this is not a final figure as it depends on the conclusion of some outstanding individual decisions around the EHC process. In 2023/24 it was £30,344.53

There were no public reports in relation to children and young people in 2024/25.



Appendix 1: Thematic learning and improving

Improving Relationships with Families

You said:

- You felt unheard and that social workers lacked empathy.
- You experienced poor attitudes during communication.
- You wanted your concerns to be taken seriously and addressed respectfully.
- You needed clearer processes and better support during difficult situations.

We did:

- Managers spoke directly with social workers about your feedback.
- Managers held reflective discussions with the wider team to improve empathy and emotional awareness.
- Managers reviewed social worker's conduct and confirmed commitment to professional standards.
- Managers and social workers committed to providing signed copies of forms and ensuring future complaints inform practice improvements.

Reflection, Training, and Improvements to Social Care Provision

You said:

- You felt staff lacked understanding of their roles and responsibilities.
- You experienced delays and inconsistent support.
- You wanted better tailored interventions and more responsive services.
- You were concerned about data handling and policy clarity.

We did:

- Senior managers identified training needs and provided additional support to social workers and their managers.
- Managers ensured apprentices received full training to prevent repeat issues.
- Managers initiated discussions between teams to improve future case management.
- Managers committed to ongoing reflection and tailored interventions based on feedback.
- Managers reviewed communication processes to prevent future delays.
- Managers requested GDPR training refreshers for relevant staff.
- Managers reviewed policies like the "Staying Put" process and embedded learning into development days.



Communication

You said:

- You struggled to get in touch with social workers.
- You felt unheard and uninformed.
- You needed correspondence to be accessible and timely.
- You wanted communication to be more inclusive and consistent.

We did:

- Managers held supervision sessions to improve communication practices.
- Managers discussed timeframes and expectations with social work professionals.
- Managers committed to team-wide reflection on communication with carers and families.
- Managers ensured admin teams are aware of translation needs.
- Managers addressed contact difficulties with individual workers.
- Managers reminded all staff to respond promptly.
- Managers introduced a staff rota to improve call handling and availability.

Reviewing and Improving Processes, Policies, and Procedures

You said:

- You were concerned about impartiality and transparency.
- You needed clearer guidance on procedures like passport applications.
- You wanted better documentation and decision-making clarity.
- You felt mental health support was lacking.

We did:

- Senior managers reminded managers to avoid assigning staff with personal links to families.
- Managers issued clear guidance on passport applications for looked after children.
- Managers reviewed session recording policies to build trust.
- Managers identified gaps in decision analysis and committed to internal review.
- Managers and social workers make referrals to in-house mental health practitioners where needed.



Appendix 2: Compliment examples

Children's Social Care

"Kevin took my call to children's services and is just like to feedback how wonderful his telephone manner. Calm, polite and courteous"

"I wanted to take a moment to express my heartfelt appreciation for the exceptional support and care provided by B during her first visit today. Her professionalism, kindness, and ability to make me feel at ease truly made a positive impact on my well-being. I was particularly impressed by Bs clear and honest explanation of her role, as well as the roles of the team. Her transparency and willingness to address my questions helped me better understand the support I am receiving and the resources available to me"

"Just a quick email to thank M and his colleagues for the prior work they did before phoning in a missing child. I noted that staff were actively out looking and doing their own phone calls and intel work which the police rely on when trying to assist"

"Cannot thank the local authority enough for everything they have done for me and my family! They have worked with us and made things easy as difficult as it has been to go through the process of having children's social services involved. L was an exceptional social worker and worked absolute wonders for us! It always felt like she worked with us and not against us! She kept us informed and updated every step of the way and everything went smoothly and quickly. If I had to go through this process again I would definitely be asking for L to support us."

Youth Justice Service

"There are so many - for me the support that I had, having someone on our side has made the world of difference and it helped us with the direction"

"The work with A was great and really helped him. He really likes D too and feels that she is there for him and supports him"

"CYJS helped with medical sessions and treated us with respect and patience. We felt like we were being listened to, consistency, and what was promised was delivered"

"Everything, your discussions, your interactions, the advice, consequences session was good, made me and my husband feel relieved"

"Support with school and access to mainstream. Support and guidance/education around his actions/behaviour. Support with school and access to mainstream"

"He's been lucky to have D, she was good with him. He needs people with a lot of patience. D has been brilliant"

"I really enjoyed working with M we get along really well and I think the work has been really effective. J has been great too"



Residential Care Services

"To everyone at Evergreen who cared for C, He had the best time (and so did I) Thank you all so much"

" Keep up the good work, all my families have spoken so highly of Evergreen and your staff, I get so much positive compliments all the time for you guys. The children love it there!!"

"I can't tell you how much we appreciate you all at Evergreen at what a wonderful provision you all provide. It has and is better than we could have ever imagined"

"We've been at Evergreen this morning for our manager's meeting and just wanted to say that your team have been brilliant, very welcoming and brought us loads of treats (sandwiches, cakes, you name it!!) – please thank them for us we'll definitely come again"

SEND

One school stated:

"We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those working within the SEND Team (Inclusion Service) at Lancashire who support myself and our schools. I work closely with 22 other Local Authorities and can genuinely say that your managers and case workers are the most proactive and efficient, helping us to safely and effectively place young people from the county into our educational settings. Going above and beyond to ensure we have all the information required to compete our matching process."

Feedback from a parent:

"I really do appreciate the time and effort that you've put into this for us. The process and systems are so long and frustrating, and at times it has felt like we would never get there, but my frustrations have always been about that - the system. Every time I've spoken to you you've done nothing but help and give the information that I needed, and I really do thank you for that"

