Agenda Item No: 7

Children's Complaints and Feedback Team's Performance and Service Improvement Report - April 2024 / March 2025

To:	Children and Young People Committee
Meeting Date:	9 September 2025
From:	Executive Director for Children, Education and Families
Electoral division(s):	All
Key decision:	No
Forward Plan ref:	Not Applicable
Executive Summary:	Local authorities must each financial year publish an Annual Report (regulation 13(3) of the Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006).The Annual Report should be arranged by the Complaints Manager and should provide a mechanism by which the local authority can be kept informed about the operation of its children's statutory complaints procedure. The report should be presented to staff, the relevant local authority committee and should be made available to the regulator and the general public. The key focus of this report is to provide quantitative and qualitative data on all types of feedback received (relating to Childrens Social Care, Targeted Support and SEND Services only) and on the local authority's performance in dealing with these.
Recommendation:	To request the committee review and scrutinise the content of the report.

Officer contact:
Name:Josephine Shickell
Post: Children's Complaints Manager
Email: jo.shickell@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

1. Creating a greener, fairer and more caring Cambridgeshire

1.1 This relates to Ambition 7, Children and Young People have the opportunity to thrive.

2. Background

2.1 In accordance with The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 (Regulations), every Local Authority must:

- Appoint one of their Officers as a designated Complaints Manager to assist the Authority in the co-ordination of all aspects of their consideration of representations;
- Take all reasonable steps to see that everyone involved in the handling and consideration of representations is familiar with the procedure set out in these Regulations (elected members play a primary role in ensuring local accountability); and
- Deal expeditiously in the handling and consideration of representations under these Regulations.

2.2 Every Local Authority must monitor the arrangements that they have made with a view to ensuring that they comply with these Regulations insofar as they regulate the procedure for the consideration of representations under Section 26 of the Children Act 1989 and must as soon as possible after the end of each financial year compile a report on the operation in that year of the procedure set out in these Regulations.

2.3 Within Cambridgeshire County Council Children, Education and Families (CEF) there is a Children's Complaints and Feedback Team comprising of a manager and two full time equivalent (FTE) officers. The team process and support the response to complaints and feedback within Children, Education and Families Directorate. They are responsible for the management of those which are Statutory complaints about Children's Social Care as well as those dealt with through the Council's Corporate Complaints process. All complaints relating to Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) are corporate complaints.

2.4 The team works in accordance with Cambridgeshire County Council (the Council) policy in relation to Customer Experience and Customer handling. The Team seeks to ensure that the delivery of their service and that of colleagues across the directorate is in accordance with the key elements of effective practice: identifying and accepting a complaint; defining a complaint; investigating a complaint; making and communicating the decision and putting things right.

2.5 Solving the problems that generate complaints is at the forefront of the approach within the directorate. There is careful consideration as to when an unresolved problem becomes a complaint. It is important to ensure that attempts at problem solving do not detract from enabling a complainant to elect to go through a formal complaints procedure.

2.6 There is a requirement to produce an annual report and for it to be made available to staff, committee, regulator and public. The Cambridgeshire's Children's Complaints and Feedback Team's Performance and Service Improvement (Annual) Report for 2024/25 is attached at Appendix 1.

3. Main Issues

3.1 The Annual Report details statistical data on the number of compliments and complaints received and responded to relating to Childrens Social Care, Targeted Support and SEND Services within 2024/25, as well as the themes, learning and service improvements arising from these.

3.2 The Children's Complaints and Feedback Team sits within the Quality Assurance and Practice Improvement service area with the Children, Education and Families Directorate. The detail and learning from complaints is included in the approach to Participation as well as oversight of performance and practice quality. The manager of the team has been a key part of the Customer Feedback Project work sitting within the whole Council led workstream on Customer Experience. There is a focus on the corporate complaints, as a whole, in preparation for the response to the revised guidance from the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) in relation to complaints handling and processes within Local Authorities.

3.3 The annual report provides detail on the aspects around complaints and feedback relating to children with SEND. The Children's Complaints and Feedback Team works closely with the SEND services within the directorate. The Area SEND inspection in January 2025 found that leaders understood the issues relating particularly to Education and Health Care Plans (EHCP). Learning from complaints has been part of the evidence used to contribute to the restructure in relation to SEND services and to develop a clear and coherent strategy to address challenges.

Context

3.4 There were 6453 children in which a safeguarding referral was received by the Council within the year. This figure is taken from the Children in Need (CIN) Census (the Council's annual return to the Department for Education (DfE)). The number of new Stage 1 complaints received relating to Children's Social Care has increased to 4.26% of this overall total, up on the previous year 3.14%.

3.5 The total number of new Stage 1 complaints received about Children's Social Care equates to 39% (275) of the total of all Stage 1. 22% of all Stage 1 Children's Social Care complaints were investigated through the statutory procedure. Of the whole total of all new Stage 1 complaints received, 8% were investigated in accordance with the Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 (Statutory Complaint Procedure). All complaints relating to SEND are dealt with through the Council's Corporate Complaint process.

3.6 Whilst the overall number of Stage 1 complaints received (Corporate and Statutory combined) has previously been stable for several years, the Council has seen a 72% increase in combined complaints over the past year, largely due to those received regarding SEND Services which includes the Statutory Assessment Team (SAT) working with children who have or have requested an EHCP. This significant increase has placed pressure upon officers handling, investigating and responding, as they can be complex and protracted in nature and escalate quickly if not resolved.

3.7 The service area that received the most complaints this year was SEND Services with 480 complaints (367 of these specifically relating to the SAT), followed by the Integrated Front Door (IFD) which is Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Assessment, Family Support and Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting with a combined 146 complaints.

3.8 The most common themes of upheld and partially upheld complaints relate to: delays and communication, together accounting for 60% of all complaints concluded.

3.9 Throughout the year, the primary theme of the total of upheld and partially upheld complaints related to difficulties with delays accounting for 42%.

3.10 The second most common theme (28%) of upheld or partially upheld complaints have been attributed to problems with communication. The Council received several complaints from parents complaining that they had not been contacted over several months and had not received necessary updates about their children. In many cases, parents had been actively seeking updates from their allocated worker.

3.11 Out of the 367 complaints received specifically about the SAT, the most common issues being complained about largely relate to delays to Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNA) including late allocation of Educational Psychologists (EPs), delays over the issuance of plans (frustrating the parents' right to appeal) and poor communication.

3.12 Of the 489 SEND Services Stage 1 complaints which concluded in the year, 83% were found to be either fully or partially upheld. This is higher than the average rate of other Stage 1 complaints in which 54% were found to be fully or partially upheld.

3.13 Out of the 782 Stage 1 complaints received this year, 33 were made by young people, of which 26 were assisted by an Advocate.

3.14 Of the 989 Stage 1-3 complaints responded to, 39% were extended from the initial agreed timescale and 26% were responded to late, outside of timescale.

3.15 There has been lots of rich learning arising from complaints concluded this year which has in turn led to several notable service improvements;

- Review of staffing levels and resource allocation procedures, particularly regarding the EP Service, seeking to appoint additional EPs and associated support staff, as required. Assessing options to procure further external EP support to complement the in-house team working in this area.
- Implementation of a refreshed strategy and programme of change, known as 'Inclusion for All', to reform, modernise and implement an early intervention approach to supporting children and young people requiring SEND support processes.
- Delivery of training workshops for Social Workers regarding Staying Put and Benefits processes, so Social Workers are better equipped to assist young people and their Carers with these processes. With Staying Put Agreements being monitored and authorised by Corporate Parenting Service Managers.
- Children in Care (CiC) Service Manager and Independent Reviewing Service Manager to meet and discuss the format and process of exit CiC Reviews, to ensure relevant plans are covered and in-place for young people before their eighteenth birthday.

4. Alternative Options Considered

4.1 Not applicable

5. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

5.1 The Children and Young People Committee is asked to consider the review and scrutinise the content of the annual report.

6. Significant Implications

6.1 Finance Implications

There are finance implications in relation to financial remedies that may be offered as part of a response to a complaint. There is guidance available through the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) where a financial remedy may be considered and the amount available. If a complainant refers their complaint to the LGO and they find there are grounds to investigate then their financial redress and remedies determined may be significantly higher than that offered by the Local Authority.

6.2 Legal Implications

There are legal implications if a complainant chooses to initiate legal proceedings through Tribunal or claims in relation to Human Rights or Equality Act legislation. This may involve other Local Authority commissioned legal and insurance services.

6.3 Risk Implications

There are no significant risk implications.

6.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

There are no significant equality and diversity implications.

7. Source Documents

7.1 Childrens Complaints and Feedback Team’s Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report April 2024 - March 2025 (see Appendix 1)