



Children's Services Complaints Annual Report 2025/2026

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1. Purpose of report and summary

The Children's Annual Complaint report provides an overview of complaints received by children's services, including social care complaints and wider children's services complaints. The report covers themes of the complaints received, response times and outcomes. The report is produced annually as a statutory requirement for Stockton on Tees Borough Council and is essential for ensuring that the voices of children and families are heard and that our services are improved following the feedback received from complaints.

This report provides information about complaints received during the twelve months between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026 and will be presented to the Children and Young People Select Committee, which is chaired by Councillor Carol Clark.

2. Summary

There was a 37% increase in complaints from the previous year, rising from 117 to 160. Complaints about social work teams more than doubled from 68 to 104, and complaints related to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) increased from 17 to 28.

Parents and their advocates/representatives remain the largest group who raise complaints about children's services, with 115 of the 160 complainants coming from this group (72%). This is similar to the previous year when 86 of the 117 complaints received we from parents (73.5%). Only three complaints were received from young people including one care leaver and while children/young people are supported to resolve concerns without formal recourse through the complaints process, there is a concern that the voice of parents not necessarily raising complaints in the interests of the child/young person is louder than the voice of that child/young person.

Communication and information sharing continues to be a prominent area of complainant's dissatisfaction, and this year has seen a significant increase in complaints where this is a factor. Complaints about staff contact have reduced by over 50%, however there has been an increase in complaints where support to families, placement and stability or educational support features

There has been an increase in complaints escalating through both corporate and statutory processes. This has been affected by the change to the corporate process, but it is concerning that we are seeing a year-on-year increase in children's statutory complaints progressing to Stage 2 and 3, although numbers are still relatively low.

3. Background

Children's social care complaints are handled in line with the Children Act 1989 Regulations 2006 and Getting the Best from Complaints guidance 2006. There is a legal requirement for all local authorities to have a complaint process in place in accordance with these regulations, The Children and Adoption Act 2002 and Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and related guidance. The statutory complaints procedure is designed with the needs of the child at the heart of the process.

Some complaints about children's services do not fall within the scope of the 2006 regulations 9e.g complaints about Educational and Health Care Plans or handling of child protection concerns under Section 47 of the Children's Act), these re addressed within the Council's corporate complaints process.

There is a legal duty to arrange advocacy for children and young people; to be able to make their views and comments about the services and care they receive under Children's Services, in line with the Advocacy Regulations 2004.

The purpose of the children's statutory complaint procedure is to ensure that the views of those receiving social care, their carers, and families, are made known, so that those views are dealt with effectively and can inform the planning and delivery of services.

Our aims are to:

- Resolve complaints quickly and where possible using informal measures.
- Reduce escalations through the process.
- Learn lessons from complaints to improve our services.

The Council has appointed a Complaints Manager who is independent of operational line management and of direct service providers (e.g. children's social work). Their role is to oversee the complaints procedure, maintain a customer focus and support the Council to ensure that complaints are dealt with swiftly and effectively.

4. Profile of Stockton on Tees

It is estimated that 206,800 people live in Stockton-on-Tees (MYE, 2024), 39,649 of which are children aged 0-15 years. In 2025/2026 we received 12000 contacts to our Front Door Service for children in need and child protection. 22% of children in need are supported due to their families experiencing acute stress, 86% of child protection plans were initiated due to concerns about neglect and 51% of children were supported because of concerns about abuse or neglect.

Stockton-on-Tees is the 69th most deprived local authority in England (out of 296). Almost one in five (19%) neighbourhoods (or lower super output areas) are in the 10% most deprived nationally while one in 10 (11%) being in the 10% least deprived. 17% of children in the borough live in the highest level of income deprivation nationally; and 22% of children aged under 16yrs live in absolute low-income families.

4.7% of school pupils in Stockton on Tees have SEN statement or EHC Plans (equal to the national percentage), and 29.2% of children who are looked after have an EHC Plan (the national percentage is 33.9%). 30% of Key Stage 2 children are meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, which is equitable to the north-east and national picture. 18.9% of 16-17 years olds with special educational needs are recorded as either Not in Education or Training (NEET) or not known. This is higher than the percentage for the north-east (14.3%) and across England (10.2%).

5. What is a complaint?

Getting the Best from Complaints says that a complaint may be generally defined as:

“an expression of dissatisfaction or disquiet in relation to an individual child or young person, which requires a response.”

Children and young people often express complaints as 'problems not being sorted out'. A common theme amongst children and young people is the need for complaints procedures to be both fast and effective: complaints procedures should 'get it sorted' straight away.

Representations may not always be complaints; they might also be positive remarks or ideas that require a response from the local authority. Enquiries or comments about the availability, delivery or nature of a service which are not criticisms are likely to constitute representations, for example, children and young people should be able to put forward ideas or proposals about the service they receive, or the establishment they live in, without having this framed as a complaint.

6. What may be complained about?

Complaints can arise because of many things relating to statutory social services functions such as:

- an unwelcome or disputed decision.
- concern about the quality or appropriateness of a service.
- delay in decision making or provision of services.
- delivery or non-delivery of services including complaints procedures.
- quantity, frequency, change or cost of a service.
- attitude or behaviour of staff.
- application of eligibility and assessment criteria.
- the impact on a child or young person of the application of a local authority policy; and
- assessment, care management and review.

However, this is not an exhaustive list. and the Complaints Manager will seek legal advice as necessary.

7. Who may complain?

Complaints about children's services can be accepted from:

- a child or young person (or a parent of his or someone who has parental responsibility for him) who is being looked after by the local authority or is not looked after by them but is in need.
- a local authority foster carer (including those caring for children placed through independent fostering agencies).
- children leaving care.
- Special Guardians.
- a child or young person (or parent of his) to whom a Special Guardian order is in force.
- any person who has applied for an assessment under section 14F(3) or (4)
- a child or young person who may be adopted, their parents and guardians.
- persons wishing to adopt a child.
- any other person whom arrangements for the provision of adoption services extend.
- adopted persons, their parents, natural parents and former guardians; and
- such other person as the local authority consider has sufficient interest in the child or young person's welfare to warrant his representations being considered by them.

We expect complaints be to be made within 12 months of the incident about which the complaint relates. We can in some instances consider your complaint if the incident occurred more than 12 months ago.

8. The complaints procedure

All our officers are aware of the complaints process and can pass details of any complaint to the appropriate person.

The Information Governance Team oversee the complaints process; their contact details can be found below:

- Email: foiandcomplaints@stockton.gov.uk
- Telephone on 01642 527521 between 9am to 4pm, Monday to Friday
- Address: Information Governance Team, Corporate Services, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, Dunedin House, Columbia Drive, Thornaby, Stockton-on-Tees, TS17 6BJ.

The Information Governance Team works closely with all the service teams to ensure responses to complaints and enquiries are completed in a timely way. It should be noted that Children's social care complaints can often be complex by their nature or involve more than one service/ agency or have a concurrent investigation underway, which may override or impact and delay a complaint investigation and response. The complaints team keeps the complainant informed in such instances.

All complaints will be assessed to determine the most appropriate way for them to be addressed. Some matters that are not appropriate for consideration within the complaints process include:

- Complaints about schools – are generally managed within each school's own complaints procedure.
- Appeals – there are separate appeals procedures for matters such as school places (dealt with under School Appeal Process), and school transport (handled through Home to School Transport Appeals)
- Education, Health and Care plans – disputes are considered through appeals by Statutory Appeals Tribunals.

We will record and acknowledge all complaints and will try to resolve them as quickly as possible. Complaints are shared with the relevant head of service for consideration. Where required, officers will talk to complainants to ensure we really understand the issues they have raised, how this has affected them, and what they want to happen to resolve the issues. If we can resolve the complaint without full investigation, we will do so in a timely manner, we call this Early Resolution. If we cannot quickly resolve the issues, they will be progressed through to the formal stages of the complaints process.

The three stages of the Children's statutory complaints procedure are as follows:

Stage 1 - Local Resolution stage (10 - 20 working days)

Stage 2 - Independent investigation stage (25 – 65 working days)

Stage 3 – Independent Review Panel (30 working days for a Panel to be held,
5 additional days for the Panel to issue its findings,
15 further days for the Council to respond.

Complaints concerning education and special educational needs, as well as some wider complaints relating to children’s services, are investigated in line with the Council’s Corporate Complaints procedure. The LGSCO published its new Complaint Handling Code for corporate complaints in February 2024, and the Council adopted the code from 1 January 2026. From 1 April 2026, the LGSCO will start to take the new code into account when reviewing Council’s performance. The new code brings in some further changes to the way complaints are handled, such as shorter response times and automatic right to escalate complaints. These changes have been reflected in an updated Corporate Complaints Policy. The stages of the corporate process are as follows:

Stage 1- Local Resolution (15 – 25 working days)

Stage 2 – Review (20 – 40 working days)

The final stage for both corporate and statutory children’s complaints, is escalation to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman.

Complaints will only be shown to those people that need to know about it in order that we can resolved the problem. The investigating officer will review records, speak with staff and gather all necessary information. They may contact complainants to clarify details or discuss progress. Complainants will receive a written response that explains our findings, decisions, and any actions we will take because of the complaint. We keep all complaint information confidential and only share it where necessary to investigate or resolve concerns.

9. Information and Accessibility

We are committed to making sure that everyone has equal access to all our services, including the complaints procedure. To help make sure the complaints procedure is easily accessible we have produced the following information leaflets:

You and your points of view	Leaflet developed with and aimed at young people
Your Right to Complain	General Leaflet
Your Right to Complain	Easy to read leaflet

All new users of children’s services are provided with a copy of the leaflet and further copies can be requested from key workers and the Information Governance Team. Information about the complaints processes is available on the Council’s website and can be requested in other formats.

To support submission of complaints an online form is available our website that includes targeted questions to support the Council to fully understand what has gone wrong, how it has affected the

complainant and how they hope the matter can be put tight. Complaints can also be submitted by email, telephone or during interaction with a council officer.

As soon as possible after receiving a complaint or representation, the Council will provide the complainant with details of the relevant procedure and signpost to advocacy services. The Council will make arrangements for the provision of advocacy services to children or young people making or intending to make complaints through the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS).

10. Review of complaints received in 2025/2026

Table 1 – Complaints received by service area

Service area	2024/2025		2025/2026	
	Number of complaints	% of total complaints	Number of complaints	% of total complaints
Adoption Tees Valley	1	1%	5	3%
Assessment Teams	5	4%	4	3%
Children with Disability	1	1%	3	2%
Children's Care & Complex Needs	3	3%	2	1%
Children's Strategy & Commissioning	1	1%	1	1%
Early Support & Projects	1	1%	0	0%
EDT	5	4%	2	1%
Education 0-11 Early Years	0	0%	1	1%
Family Support	0	0%	3	2%
LADO	0	0%	2	1%
School Inclusion & Vulnerable Learners	0	0%	1	1%
SEND Assessment & Reviews	5	4%	8	5%
SEND Placement & Governance	12	10%	20	13%
Social Work Teams	68	58%	104*	65%
Through Care Teams	15	13%	4	3%
Total	117		160	

* 1 complaint assigned to SEND Assessment and Review also related to the Childrens with Disability service area. 01482/2526.

There has been a 37% increase in the overall number of complaints received compared to the previous year. Complaints about social work teams have more than doubled since 2024/2025, increasing from 68 to 104. There has also been an increase in complaints received about Special Educational Needs (SEND), with 28 complaints being received compared to 17 the previous year.

Table 2 – Complaints received by stage

2024/2025	2024/2025	2025/2026
Early Resolution	108	83
Corporate Stage 1	21	75

Statutory Stage 1	2	6
Corporate Stage 2	3	19
Statutory Stage 2	2	4
Statutory Stage 3	1	0

94% of complaints received, were either resolved or the complainant was uncontactable, so the complaint was withdrawn. This compares to 87% in 2024/2025.

There has been a significant increase in complaints progressed to Stage 2 of both the corporate and statutory processes, as well as an increase in the number of Stage 3 review panels requested under the statutory process. While this can be attributed in part to changes to the corporate process whereby the Council is no longer able to decline requests for progression where any earlier response is considered to be robust, it reflects complaints dissatisfaction with the Council's early attempts to resolve matters.

10. Themes of complaints

Complaints often cover more than one theme, and the following captures the types of issues complained about:

Theme	24/25	25/26
Communication & Information Sharing	37	69
Staff Conduct	32	13
Decision Making	13	8
Child Protection & Safety	13	16
Support to Families	9	22
Educational Support	7	12
Family Contact & Visitation	6	2
EHCP Assessment & Plan Issues	3	7
SEND Support & Provision	3	4
Placement & Stability	2	12
Transition & Leaving Care	2	0

Complaints are typically varied by their nature. Some complaints may seem straightforward and easy to fix –such as a miscommunication or a delay with a service. However, complaints can also be extremely complex and sensitive. Communication and information sharing continues to be a prominent area of complainant's dissatisfaction, and this year has seen a significant increase in complaints where this is a factor. Complaints about staff contact have reduced by over 50%, however there has been an increase in complaints where support to families, placement and stability or educational support features.

11. Who complained?

Parents and their advocates/representatives remain the largest group who raise complaints about children's services, with 115 of the 160 complainants coming from this group (72%). This is similar to the previous year, when 86 of the 117 complaints received we from parents (73.5%).

Only three complaints were received from young people, including one care leaver. While this is higher than the one complaint received from a young person in the previous year, it raises a concern as to whether the voice of young people is heard within the complaints process. It should

be noted that Independent Reviewing Officers and Personal Advisors support children in our care and care leavers to seek their views and address concerns outside the formal complaint process. Children in care also give their feedback through their looked after reviews. Other groups who complain are relatively small numbers and include complaints made by other relatives and adults involved in a child/young person's life.

12. Advocacy Services provided

Children and young people are entitled to make a complaint or other representations with the help of an advocate, and the Council has duty to provide advocacy in line with the advocacy regulations. Of the 160 complaints received three complaints received from children/young people, all were provided with advocacy services through the North East Advocacy Service (NYAS).

13. Outcomes of complaints

There are generally four outcomes of a complaint, these are:

- Upheld – where we agree with the complainant.
- Partially upheld – where we agree with the complainant in part, but not fully.
- Not upheld – where we do not agree that there has been a service failure.
- Resolved with complainant without formal written response.

11 complaints were not accepted for consideration within the complaints process. The reasons for exclusion included:

- Investigation could prejudice an ongoing police investigation.
- Matter should be or are being considered within legal proceedings.
- Complainant is not eligible to raise matter.

Table 3 – Complaint findings

Corporate and Children's Statutory Complaints

	Upheld	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld	Resolved with complainant	Withdrawn	Refused	Ongoing	Total
Corporate Stage 1	9	10	36	5 (without formal response) 1 (resolved early)	2	11	1	75
Corporate Stage 2	1	7	10		1			19
Statutory Stage 1	1	3	2					6
Statutory Stage 2		1			1		2	4
Statutory Stage 3								

TOTAL	11	20	47	6	3	11	1	
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A small number of complaints have been resolved without formal response being required or have been withdrawn by the complainant. This evidence that attempts to resolve the matter being complained about continue even after a complaint has been raised.

The 'partially upheld' and 'inconclusive' outcomes are currently being phased out in line with LGSCO advice.

Complaints are often about decisions made by the service and not necessarily about the department making poor decisions. Rather, that they disagree with the rationale or policy on which the decision is based.

Of the remaining complaints that were investigated the outcomes can be found below

- 11 (14%) complaints were Upheld
- 20 (26%) complaints were Partially Upheld
- 47 (60%) complaints were Not Upheld

14. Learning and Service Improvements as a result of complaints

Complaints provide invaluable information which may be used to identify issues in services, help officer learning and also identify any risks and so improve services for the future. We use the data and learning from complaints to drive service improvements, update procedures, and provide feedback to staff so that issues do not happen again. The learning from complaints is fed into children's services quality assurance systems with outcomes fed back into operational delivery. The Council also holds an Annual Complaints Forum to disseminate key learning from complaints to line managers to ensure that information derived from complaints is used to contribute to practice development, commissioning and service planning. Monitoring highlights how effective communication is within the Council and to the children and young people receiving our services, where staff training is required and whether resources are targeted appropriately. This is fed back into the system to facilitate and improve policy and practice.

Table 4 – What you told us and what we did...

Below is a summary of learning that has been identified from the complaints that have been investigated.

Corporate Stage 1 Learnings

Team	Theme	Learnings and actions
Social Work Teams	Child Protection & Safety	Officers will ensure that going forward they will inform parents of the names of the social worker and team manager upon allocation. Agreed that communication with families about decision-making could be better and that when possible, safety planning will be agreed in person and will be recorded clearly. When parents raise safeguarding concerns, these will be taken seriously and acted on in a timely manner. This will be reviewed

		through the PLO process for cases and escalated as part of our internal learning process. Agreement to explore and improve how we a gather the wishes and feelings of a child who is non-verbal requiring specialist communication approaches.
Social Teams	Work Decision Making	Transfer discussions should take place if case responsibility for a child or young person needs to change, to promote information sharing and reduce potential delay.
Assessment Teams	Communication & Information Sharing, Staff Conduct	For Children's Hub: When contacting families to follow up on a referral officers should confirm the family and child's details before disclosing information about the referral. For SBC school admissions: Officers should ensure that all processing of personal information remains accurate. Where data is identified as being inaccurate, prompt action will be taken to erase or rectify that data.
Social Teams	Work Placement & Stability	Management involved will complete a structured reflective learning process on: how their actions were perceived, what could have been done differently, how to avoid future applicants feeling judged, how to improve transparency during sensitive conversations. We will strengthen our recruitment communication by: • ensuring candidates clearly understand their legal duty to disclose any convictions, • explaining in advance when a manager needs to be consulted, • avoiding conversations that may appear secretive or excluding, • ensuring sensitive information handling is explained
Social Teams	Work Communication & Information Sharing	Team discussions took place about how to have positive communication with families, however challenging this may be.

Assessment Teams	Communication & Information Sharing	Team discussions took place about ensuring that full consideration is given to children's religious and cultural backgrounds when assessments are undertaken, to strengthen our practice.
Social Work Teams	Communication & Information Sharing, Support to Families	Staff training conducted on distinguishing between fostering, kinship, and private arrangements. Improved communication protocols during emergency placements. Clearer guidance on financial support and legal responsibilities.
Social Work Teams	Placement & Stability	The complaint found that we were not clearly explaining to care leavers their responsibility to keep rent payments up to date. As a result, the Higher Education Policy was updated and now includes clearer guidance around student accommodation. We now seek to secure 52-week accommodation wherever possible or make appropriate alternative plans, in advance if this cannot be arranged. In addition, we have introduced a written agreement that will be shared with and signed by the young person so that their responsibilities are clearly understood from the outset.
SEND Placement & Governance	EHCP Assessment & Plan Issues	Complaint related to lack of funding for activities identified in a young person's EOTAS (Education Otherwise than at School) plan. Complaint found that the Council has a duty to fund the provision outlined in the EOTAS package.
SEND Assessment & Reviews	Educational Support	All staff were reminded of the expectations regarding timely and appropriate responses to parent communication. The complaint highlighted an important area for improvement which was taken very seriously.

Corporate Stage 2 Learnings

Team	Theme	Learnings and actions
Social Work Teams	Communication & Information Sharing	A review about how safety plans are explained, agreed, and shared with families to ensure expectations are consistently clear.
Adoption Tees Valley	Communication & Information Sharing	Stage 1 complaint responses should sufficiently articulate decisions made and reasons for those. Safeguarding processes and associated terminology are inherently complex, and any lack of clarity can understandably give rise to confusion or concern for families.

Emergency Duty Team	Communication & Information Sharing	Health colleagues via, Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership, will be made aware of the differing responses from professionals (GPs in this case) when referrals are being investigated, and the impact this can have on the child, the family and service delivery.
Social Work Teams	Support to Families	Strengthened recording and communication: Where significant concerns are discussed with families, these should be clearly reflected in case records and followed up in writing where appropriate, to ensure transparency and a shared understanding of the issues being raised. The complaint has reinforced the importance of using formal multi agency forums, such as strategy meetings and conferences, to ensure concerns are tested, shared openly, and subject to appropriate professional challenge rather than relying solely on informal discussion. Clearer explanation of changes in professional assessment: Where professional views evolve over time, this will be explicitly explained to families, including what new information or patterns of concern have contributed to the revised assessment, to reduce the perception of sudden or unexplained changes in position. Practitioners will be reminded of the importance of ensuring parents understand the purpose of processes such as Child in Need and safeguarding escalation, what these frameworks mean in practice, and how parental views are considered within decision making.
Assessment Teams	Communication & Information Sharing, Staff Conduct	When developing Stockton Council's new Family Help Point service, additional check points will be instigated to avoid the incorrect linking of information. For example, police referrals received into the Family Help Point will be triaged before being accepted into social care systems. This additional due diligence will give us the opportunity to check the accuracy of data before accepting a referral. The process and systems around this will be reviewed to understand what improvements can be made to ensure data accuracy.
SEND Placement & Governance	Educational Support	SENDMAP panel feedback processes will be reviewed to ensure that there is no use of unexplained acronyms in correspondence, that referrals are fully and accurately reflected to the panel members and chair, that assumptions are not made beyond the evidence presented, and communication with parents is clear, jargon free and respectful.
Social Work Teams	Communication & Information Sharing	Action has been taken to remind staff to record all types of communications and evidence decision making.

Social Work Teams	Communication & Information Sharing	To ensure that all workers clearly record that information has been shared with parents/carers around the reason for the referral and the purpose of the assessment. It will be communicated to all social workers to ensure that families are provided with information to explain the remit in which there is social care involvement.
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Children's Statutory Stage 1 Learnings

Team	Theme	Learnings and actions
Adoption Tees Valley	Support to Families	An assessment process was adversely affected by procedural errors at the school and a lack of adaptability by a commissioned service. ATV have arranged to review the services provided by the commissioned service with Stockton Borough Council's Commissioning Team to prevent further issues occurring. Any future work with that commissioned service will be subject to a satisfactory review.
Adoption Tees Valley	Communication & Information Sharing	Changes have been made to communication about the VMB system to ensure that birth families and adoptive families can have their questions about the VMB platform answered more promptly and are supported by workers with the appropriate knowledge and experience. KiT team will ensure that they do not suggest to family members that questions for the adopters are included in updates for adopted children. The manager has strengthened their understanding of complaints processes and procedures and have taken proactive steps by enrolling in relevant training. Officers will actively engage birth family members when a Keeping in Touch update is sent or when there is an update from an adoptive family. This is through telephone contact, and one to one visits currently but

Children's Statutory Stage 2 Learnings

No further learnings were identified at Stage 2 that had not been determined at Stage 1.

Children's Statutory Stage 3 Learnings

A learning action plan has been agreed in relation to one complaint considered by a children's statutory stage 3 review panel. The following service improvements are being taken forward in relation to this complaint:

1. We are reviewing our decision-making processes to ensure a clear and consistent pathway for accessing support. This includes strengthening the consistency of respite recommendations and establishing a more robust, multi-agency panel to guide and quality-assure decisions.
2. Adoption Tees Vallet are strengthening their support to families which will include a more bespoke plan for meeting the adoptees understanding of the intervention/therapy.
3. We are developing a standardised leaflet regarding child protection strategy meetings to be shared with parents/carers and this will be embedded it into practice workflows, to ensure it is accessible. We will monitor its use through audits and parent feedback.
4. As part of our ongoing service improvement work, we will continue to encourage social workers to provide reports to parents as early as possible.
5. The Emergency Duty Team telephone systems have been updated and, Netcall system is in place. Netcall helps improve clear communication by bringing all customer contact—phone, email and chat—into one platform so information isn't lost or repeated.
6. We are reinforcing expectations of both internal and external practitioners for challenging inaccurate minutes and using formal escalation pathways. This is being taken forward through the Hartlepool & Stockton Safeguarding Children's Partnership Policies and Procedures Group to ensure escalation routes are clearly embedded within all relevant policies and procedures, and it will also be picked up through the Engine Room for ongoing oversight.

15. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

4 of the 8 complaints investigated by the Ombudsman related to children's services, all four complaints were upheld. Two of the complaints related to SEND, two to children's social care. One decision relating to SEND was made a public report and the Ombudsman recommended that the Council write to 99 other parents who may have been affected. The Ombudsman was satisfied with the actions taken by the Council following their decisions being made.

Complaints	Service	Outcome	Findings
Failure to progress a complaint to Stage 3 under the Children's Statutory process	Childrens Social Care	Upheld	The council had investigated at Stage 2 of statutory process but agreed with complainant that they would refer early to the Ombudsman. Ombudsman found that to be fault and recommended we arrange a Stage 3 panel which was held in December 2025
Failure to provide equipment specified in EHCP	SEN	Upheld	Fault found in delay in providing a laptop that the Local Authority said they would provide for a young person with an EHCP. Council apologised.
Related to issues at neighbouring childrens home	Childrens Social Care	Upheld	When receiving complaints about a Council run children's home we will work with residents to resolve matters.
The Council failed to secure special educational provision in the EHCP, and also failed to carry out the annual review of the plan, despite sending letters saying we had done so. 99 others also received annual review completion letters when no meeting or consultation had taken place.	SEN	Upheld	A Public Report was issued by the Ombudsman. The Council failed to secure the special educational provision in the child's EHCP. It also failed to carry out the annual review despite sending letters saying it had done so. This resulted in the child missing out on their special educational provision and caused the family uncertainty, distress and frustration. 99 others also received annual review completion letters when no meeting or consultation had taken place.

16. Timescale Performance

Table 5 – Early Resolution

	2024/2025	2025/2026
Number of complaints received	117	160
Resolved at Early Resolution	84	76
Progressed to Childrens Statutory Process from Early Resolution	2	2

Progressed to Corporate process from Early Resolution	12	3
Uncontactable	5	2
Withdrawn	5	0
Not appropriate for ER	9 (all to Corporate)	21 (4 to Children's Statutory and 17 to Corporate)
Entered at Stage 1 Corporate	Not applicable under new corporate process	56 straight to S1 under new corporate process

Table 6 – Early Resolution Response Rates

Within timescales	Took over 5 Working Days	% resolved within timescales
62	19	77%

3 - Availability of Complainant

16 - Availability of Service

1 - Complexities of Complaint

(1 case selected more than 1 option)

Corporate Complaints Process

Table 7 – Complaint Response times Stage 1

Complaints responded to on time	Complaints responded to late	Complaint not responded to
60	7*	6 - refused 1 - no consent 2 - court proceedings 1 - matters already addressed 2 - another route available 2 complainants uncontactable 1 withdrawn

* One is still ongoing and being led by Hartlepool Borough Council

Table 8 – Complaint Response times Stage 2

Complaints responded to on time	Complaints responded to late
16	3

Childrens Statutory Complaints**Table 9 – Complaint Response times Stage 1**

Complaints responded to within 10 working days	Complaints responded to within extended 20 working days	Reason for extensions/late responses
	1	5 (3 – availability of staff, 2 – complexities of case)

Table 10 – Complaint Response times Stage 2

One case progressed to Stage 2 but was later withdrawn

One case is ongoing at Stage 2.

Complaint Response times - Stage 3

Two complaint that had been received in 2024/25 progressed to Stage 3 in 2025/26. One complaint was led by Redcar and Cleveland Council. No learnings were identified for Stockton Council. The other related to post adoption support and the Stage 3 review panel was held within the defined timescales.

17. Financial Remedies

Financial remedy was made in respect of 2 complaints. The table below shows the amount paid and reasons:

Table 11 – Financial Remedy

Amount of Remedy	Service Area	Reason for remedy
£730.98	Social Work Teams	Reimbursement/Cancellation of Care Fees
£2982 plus	SEND Placement & Governance	Loss of Service

18. Training

There is a training programme in place to ensure that officers investigating complaints have the necessary skills and experience to do so. The complaints manager offers bespoke training sessions each year to officers dealing with complaints under the corporate complaints process and also the children's statutory process that relate to Childrens Services. Training available through the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman is also highlighted to officers. A complaint forum is also held each year giving complaint handlers across the Council to come together, share experiences and hear about how we have improved our services following our consideration of complaints.

The Children's Service management team work alongside the Information Governance Team to support collaborative working practices and develop internal processes and monitoring arrangements for complaint handling.

The Council ensures that the complaints procedure is known and understood by all staff, Elected Members, Investigating Officers, Independent Persons, Review Panellists, service users, their carers and representatives.

The Complaints Manager should consider the contributions that these groups can make to training and discussions about the delivery of the complaint's procedure.

Tailored training is available to staff at all levels of the authority. Our training strategy includes a basic E-Learning tool to give officers an introduction to the principles and working of the complaint's procedure, alongside bespoke training sessions to help officers develop the skills they need to handle complaints effectively and efficiently. The training explores the relationships between the complaints procedures and related policies, including confidential reporting whistle blowing and the duties of staff under the authority's Code of Conduct to report improper behaviour and wrong doing. Training also includes raising understanding of the cultural and special needs of individual complainants so that practice can be tailored to suit their needs.

19. Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

Each year the Ombudsman publishes its annual letter and summary of statistics on the complaints and enquiries it has received about Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and the decisions made. The Council has received the latest report for the financial year 2025/2026.

Of the 51 complaints and enquiries responded to by the Ombudsman in 2025/26, 7 were progressed to investigation, with all 7 of the complaints being upheld. 4 of the 7 complaints related to Children's Services - two related to SEND and two related to children's social care.

Although the Ombudsman upheld all 4 complaints, in one case the Ombudsman decided not to investigate the matters themselves as they were satisfied that the Council had already accepted the fault they identified and remedied the issues to prevent the faults happening for others. The Ombudsman felt they could not achieve anything further for the complainants by investigating matters.

One decision relating to SEND was made a public report and the Ombudsman recommended that the Council write to 99 other parents who may have been affected.

20. Conclusion

Complaints and feedback are used to better understand the needs of our customers and offer and opportunity to learn and improve. As a direct result of our complaints in 2025/2026 the Council we have improved communication with families, made changes to policy and processes and staff and managers have attended specific training sessions. The Council's Information Governance Team is a centralised team which has responsibility for the coordination of all complaints across the Council. The Complaints Manager holds regular meetings with senior officers in Children's Services to expedite and support complaint resolution. Key priorities for the Information Governance Team working with Children's services next year will be continuation of effective communication channels, ensuring quality and timely responses and in particular:

- **A culture of accountability**, where mistakes are acknowledged and learned from, to ensure services are improved. Addressing issues raised in complaints quickly demonstrates a commitment to improvement.
- **Clearly explaining decisions** to families and documenting the rationale behind them to build trust and reduce complaints.
- **Regular Monitoring and Evaluation:** Independent reviews of complaints and continuous feedback loops help identify systemic issues and drive service improvements.
- **Effective Complaint Handling:** A fair, transparent, and accessible complaint-handling process will encourage families to raise concerns without fear of reprisal and ensures issues are resolved constructively. These key lessons contribute to building a more responsive, compassionate, and effective children's social care system.

Majella McCartney

Director of Children's Services

6 July 2026