



Harrow Council
Children's Services Annual Complaints
and Feedback Report
1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023

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1. Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of the Council's performance for Children's Services complaints for the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, which is a requirement of the Children Act 1989 Statutory Regulations. The report also provides information about the non-statutory complaints received for Education Services, as well as other representations for Children's Services.

Complaint numbers increased by 58% from 33 complaints recorded for all stages in 2021/22 to 78 complaints in 2022/23. This was mainly as a result of reviewing the process of handling complaints and feedback, ensuring formal complaints are investigated in line with the Council complaints procedures.

63% of Stage 1 complaints were responded on time, which is an improvement on the previous year (55%).

The Directorate welcomes all feedback about its services including compliments and complaints.

Below is a summary of the provisional figures for Children's Services during 2022/23 which will be finalised at the end of July. These figures provide a context to the number of services provided and the proportion of complaints and representations received.

- Of the 4549 children open to Children's Social Care in the year, 54% were male and 45% were female and 1% were unborn/not known. There is significant diversity in the ethnicity of this cohort of children.
- On the last day of the year (31st March 2023) a total of 1628 children were receiving a service from Social Care with the rest of the 4549 having ceased throughout the year.
- A total of 3018 referrals were received in 2022/23 by Children's Social Care with the most common referral source being Police and Schools, both accounting for 60% of referrals received. The service completed 2999 assessments.
- A total of 1181 child protection investigations were initiated in the period, with 355 leading to an initial child protection conference.
- There were 609 Child Protection Plans (CPP) active at some point during 2022/23, 289 new plans were started and 370 ceased during the year. At 31st March 2023, 239 children were being supported and monitored through a Child Protection Plan
- A total of 293 Children were Looked After (CLA) at some point during 2022/23. During the year, 107 children became newly looked after and 115 stopped being looked after. At 31st March 2023, Harrow had 180 looked after children.
- At 31st March 2023, Harrow had 51 approved fostering households offering 119 placements
- During 2022/23, approximately 5,205 families accessed the Cedars and Hillview Early Support hubs and 299 young people accessed the Wealdstone Early Support hub.

2. Outcomes of Key Actions from 2022/23

The response times for complaints and queries improved during the reporting year, together with the overall quality of responses.

The process for managing and monitoring of complaints and feedback were refreshed to ensure all representations were handled effectively.

Lessons from complaints were regularly shared with Management and disseminated to all teams.

The complaint communication materials were reviewed and updated, to ensure an accessible and responsive service.

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.

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 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)

Non-social care complaints, concerning education and special educational needs, are investigated in line with the Council's Corporate complaints procedure which comprises two stages as follows:

Stage 1- Local Resolution (15 working days)

Stage 2 – Review (20 working days)

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

Complaints about schools are managed within each school's own complaints procedure. Appeals for school places are considered under the School Appeal Process and disputes such as those relating to the Education, Health and Care plans are considered through appeals to the Statutory Appeals tribunal.

4. Summary of Complaints Activity

During 2022/23, the complaints team received a total of 309 representations for Children's Services, as compared to 246 in 2021/22 and 177 during 2020/21.

Parents were the main group to make a complaint or raise an enquiry regarding Children's Services and made up over 90% of the contact. Other contact was by carers and/or family members, a young care leaver or a legal representative.

There are notably few complaints received from children and young people receiving Children's services under the formal complaints process. Children and young people who have received a service or been in care are able to raise their concerns directly with their Social Worker, with their Independent Reviewing Officer, at their Child Looked After Review (LAC) Meetings (twice-yearly) or in their feedback sessions with the Children's Participation Officer (usually once-yearly). They can also use an online feedback form which they can submit at any time.

The most popular method for a person making a complaint was by email, followed by the use of the online form.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of representations by quarterly period in 2022/23.

Table 1 Representations recorded by quarter 2022-23

Representation	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Stage 1	7	11	21	30
Stage 2	2	2	1	4
Ombudsman	0	5	1	2
Queries	52	37	10	7
MP	15	8	15	13
Member	10	16	11	8
Compliments	4	10	2	5

There were 69 stage 1 complaints, 9 stage 2 complaints, 8 Ombudsman complaints, 106 queries, 51 MP enquiries, 45 Member enquiries and 21 compliments which totalled 309 representations received during 2022/23.

As illustrated in Chart 1, the number of complaints investigated at stages 1 and 2 increased in 2021/22, when 27 stage 1 and 6 stage 2 complaints were recorded.

In line with the previous year, no stage 3 complaint panels were held in 2022/23. This is due to the low escalation rate from stage 1 to stage 2 for social care complaints and due to implementing effective local resolution.

Chart 1

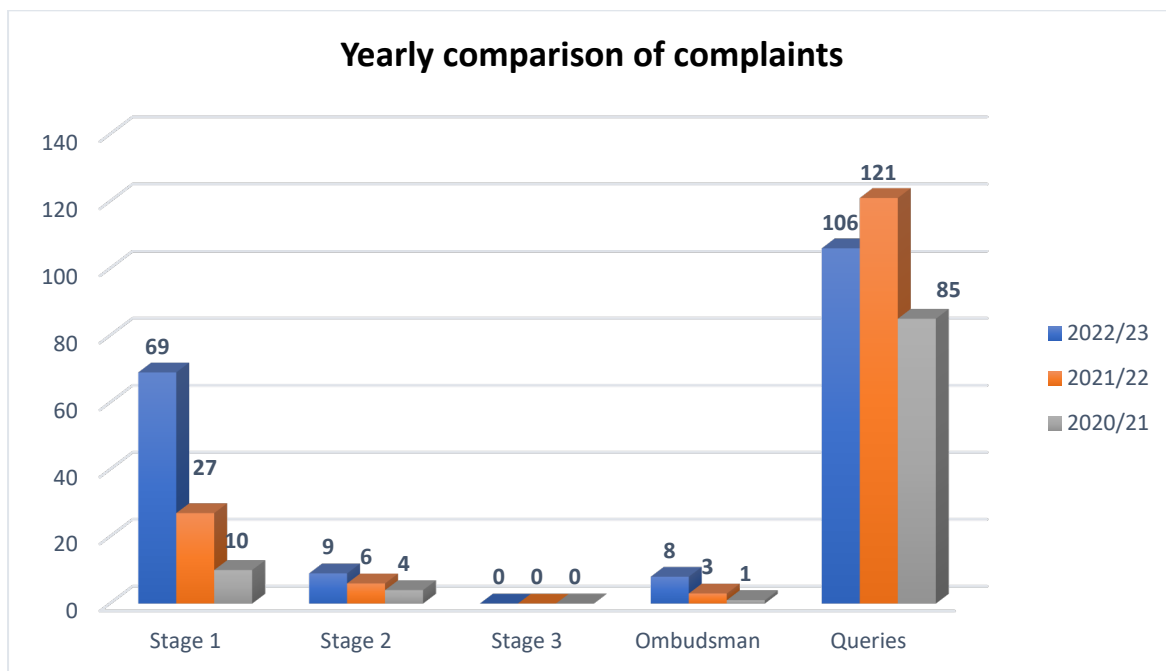


Table 2 Yearly trends for complaints and queries

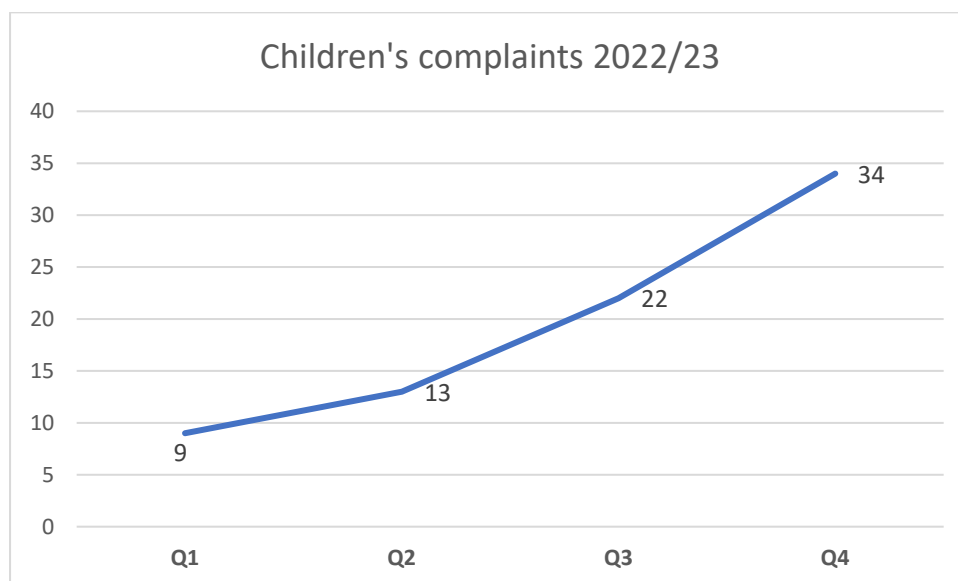
Year	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Ombudsman	Queries
2022/23	69	9	0	8	106
2021/22	27	6	0	3	121
2020/21	10	4	0	1	85

Table 2 shows a total of 192 complaints and queries in 2022/23, 190 in 2021/23 and 100 in 2020/21.

Overall, the number of complaints and queries has increased year on year, as detailed above, which is largely reflected by the number of general queries recorded.

Chart 2 shows the upward quarterly trend of complaints recorded through 2022/23.

Chart 2 Quarterly Trend Stage 1 and 2 complaints 2022/23



4.1. Stage 1 complaints

During 2022/23, a total of 69 stage 1 complaints were recorded and investigated for Children's services.

26 of the 69 stage 1 complaints related to Education and Special Educational Needs and Reviews (SENAR) services concerning issues about school places, school transport and the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and process. These complaints were investigated in accordance with the Council's corporate complaints procedure.

43 complaints related to Children's social care services under the statutory complaint procedure. In the context of 4549 children being open to the service during 2022/23 with 2999 completed assessments, the number of complaints received is low. Most issues are often raised and addressed directly with the social worker.

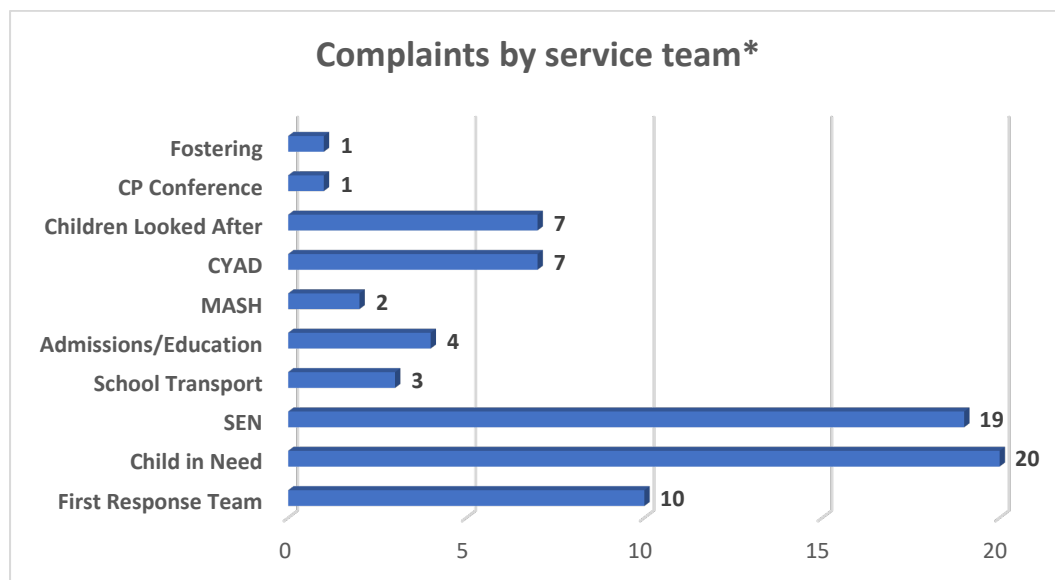
4.1.1 Complaints by service

A breakdown of the complaints by service team is detailed in Chart 3 and Table 4 and shows that the Special Educational Needs and Reviews Service (SENARS) and Child in Need (CIN) teams reported the highest number of complaints, due to the nature of the services they provide.

Parents raised complaints mostly related to their child's Education, Health and Care plan and the provision they wanted to ensure was in place to meet their child's needs.

The Child in Need service mostly received complaints from parents dissatisfied with the content of assessments and reports, unhappy with the level of intervention as well as individual social workers.

Chart 3



*Please note complaints can involve more than one service team.

Table 4 Stage 1 Complaints received by teams by quarter

Team	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Children's Safeguarding	0	0	0	1
Children Looked After	0	1	2	4
CYAD*	1	1	3	2
MASH**	0	1	0	1
Admissions/Education	0	1	1	2
School Transport	0	0	2	1
SENARS	5	3	4	7
Child in Need	1	3	6	10
First Response Team	1	1	3	5
Fostering			1	

*Children and Young Adults with Disabilities, ** Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub

4.1.2. Issues raised as complaints

As shown in Chart 4, the highest complaints concerned issues regarding the Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and against individual staff.

For Education and SENAR services, the complaints were for a range of issues including delays with the Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP) process with naming a school and requests for related provision, seeking school places, requests

for educational support and actions taken regarding home elected children and school transport.

Children’s social care is an emotive area of work, which involves difficult decisions being made by professionals, sometimes in conflict with the views of parents and carers making the complaint. The work is often intrusive and involves direct work with children and families. Parent/ carers frequently raised objections and concerns about the involvement of the service and regarding a child’s allocated social worker’s involvement.

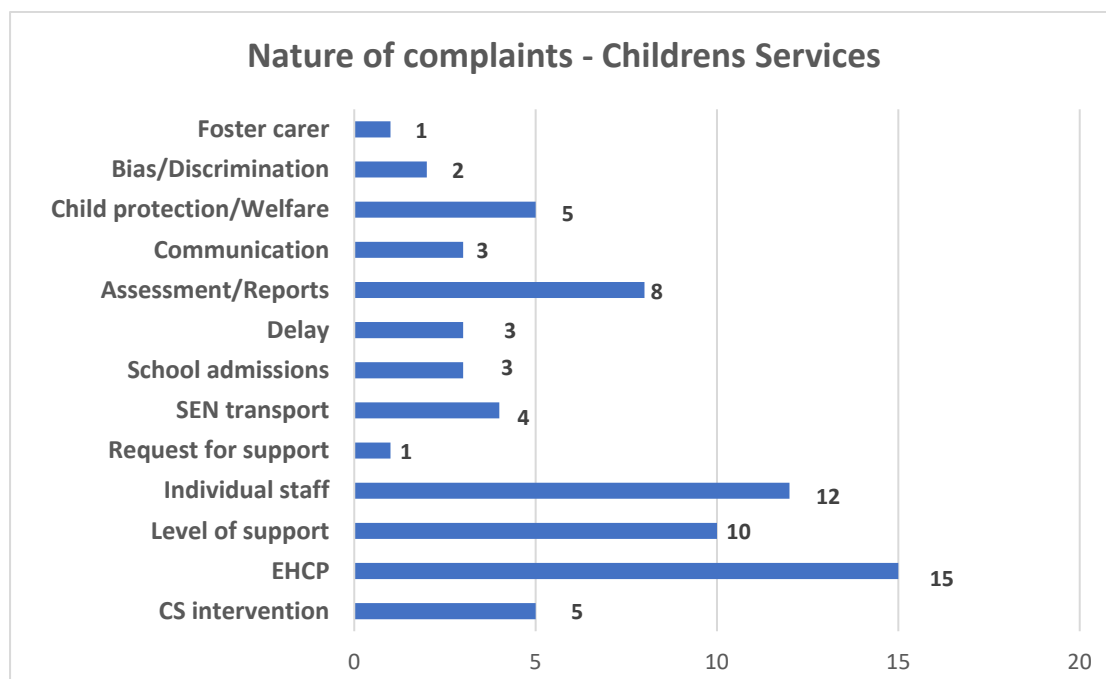
Other social care complaints challenged the level of support provided and intervention in their family life. Social work assessments and reports raised complaints about the information recorded and disagreement with the facts or professional opinions recorded about family members and related events.

Notably, few complaints are received and recorded from children and young people directly under the Statutory Complaints procedure. For this reporting year, the complaints team recorded two complaints by young care leavers, regarding their care provision and level of support.

The Children’s Participation Officer works closely with children and young people who are in care and receiving support, to address concerns outside the formal complaint process. Children in care also give their feedback through their looked after reviews.

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.

Chart 4



Some examples of complaints are provided below.

Staff conduct:

It is evident that the worker is unable to manage our family as she is asking more senior professionals to intervene and communicate on her behalf.

Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP):

I feel that it is tremendously unfair that she could potentially be completely uprooted from her friends simply because the Local Authority did not secure the provisions outlined in her plan, refused to hold the school accountable for this provision, and at all levels the impact on her mental health was completely ignored, resulting in the current situation.

Assessment/Reports:

I want to complaint against social service for harassing me and presenting fake facts and documentation in child protection plan

Communication:

I have made numerous complaints directly to social workers via telephone messages and I've requested to speak with managers but all have been ignored.

Support:

I also feel that social services aren't even trying to help me move forward in life, which is frustrating because I have no one to turn to for advice or guidance. Social services are supposed to support me but they have failed, but I haven't seen any progress or support in this area.

School Admissions:

The school that was suggested by the local education authority does not meet his needs in all aspects, the local authority disregarded our choice of school because I know these is best school for my son. I visited several schools, and we came to the decision that will benefit him and also make him independent in the future, to my dismay I was told the public funds cannot be wasted on him. I have therefore come to the conclusion that my son is being discriminated against.

School Transport:

I feel I was massively misled by your team when you changed his bus. He was moved to a bus due to another child's behaviour - which you did not address. I was told the times would be better than his old bus, this was a lie.

4.1.3. Complaint response timescales

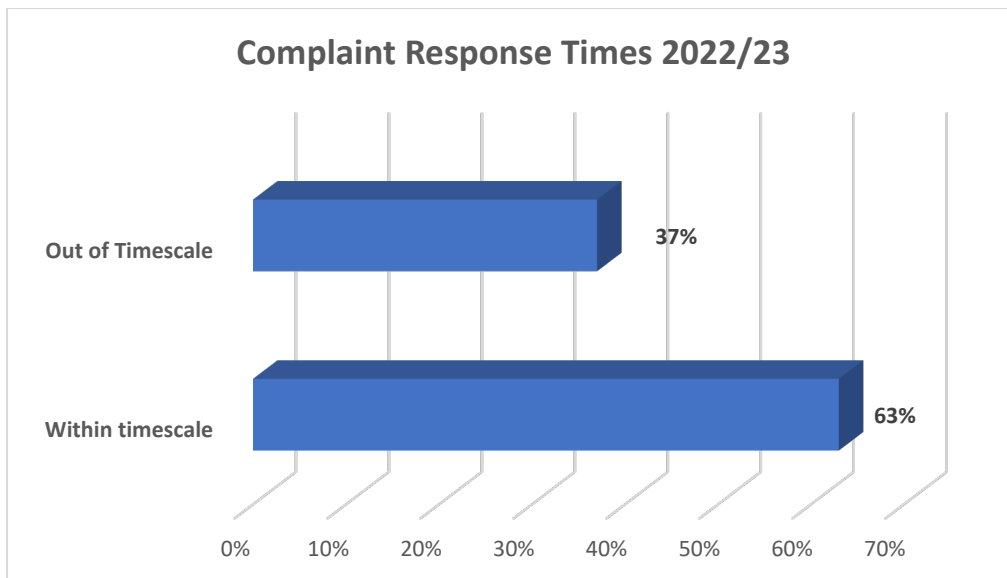
The complaints team works closely with all the service teams to ensure responses to complaints and enquiries are completed in a timely way.

Stage 1 complaint response times improved by 14% during 2022/23, with 63% of stage 1 complaints responded on time, as compared to 55% in the previous year. There is a clear propensity to build on this improvement in 2023/24.

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.

Chart 5



4.1.4 Complaint outcomes

During 2022/23, 56 stage 1 complaints were completed and responded, which included complaints that were in progress at the end of the previous reporting year. Table 4 details the yearly comparative data and trend for the majority of complaints not being upheld.

As illustrated in Chart 6, 68% of the completed complaints were not upheld.

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. The rate of upheld and partially upheld complaints is therefore low.

Table 4

Completed response outcomes by year

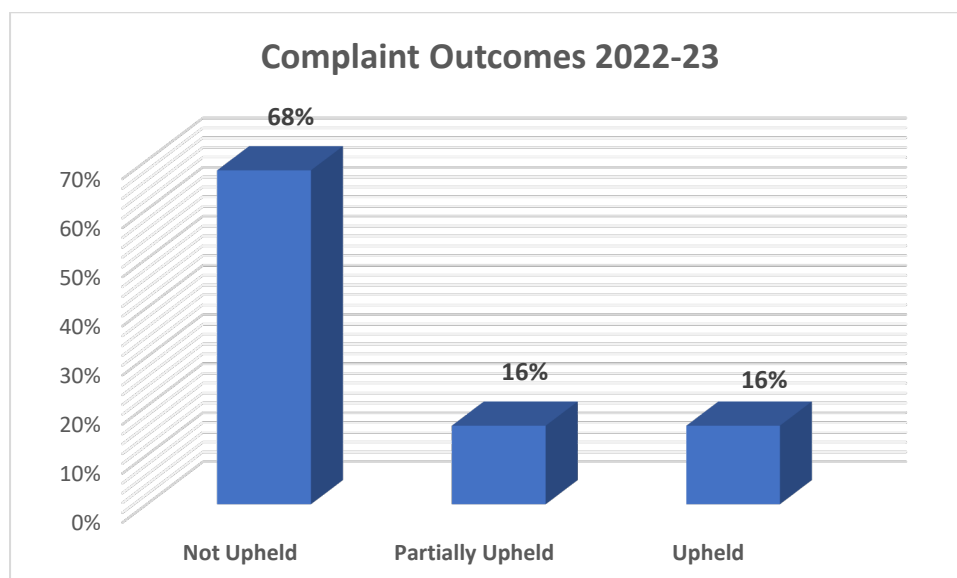
	Not Upheld			Partially Upheld			Upheld			Total outcomes		
	22/23	21/22	20/21	22/23	21/22	20/21	22/23	21/22	20/21	22/23	21/22	20/21
Education /SEN	8	5	0	1	1	1	8	1	0	17	7	1
Children’s Social Care	30	17	7	8	3	2	1	0	0	39	20	9
Total Yearly Stage 1 outcomes, by percentage	68%	85%	70%	16%	12%	30%	16%	3%	0%			

Complaints have also involved issues that are not within the remit of the work that is undertaken by Children’s services and therefore were not upheld, such as concerns linked to private proceedings, court matters or another organisation. In such cases, the response letter provides an explanation and clarity of the service team’s involvement.

Complaints that were upheld or partially upheld related to operational issues, such as delays in action/decision making and correspondence sent, inadequate communication and the quality of case recording. The learning section provides information on the actions taken forward for service improvement.

Complaints regarding the Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP) delays impacting statutory timescales were mostly upheld. Delays in naming a school place for a child or amending/finalising an EHC plan were largely attributable to the increase in caseloads and staffing capacity pressures during 2022/23.

Chart 6



4.2. Stage 2 Complaints

Children’s Services received nine stage 2 requests (two related to Education and seven concerned social care) in 2022/23.

Six complaints were investigated or were still being investigated at stage 2, at the close of the reporting period. A summary of the complaints is detailed below.

Case 1 – Social care complaint upheld regarding the quality of contact and communication with the parent. A remedy payment was recommended, with learning implemented for social work practice. The complaint findings concluded that further attempts should have been made to ascertain the parent’s contact details to keep him informed regarding any child welfare issues. The learning identified that better communication between the social worker and parent should have been in place. As a result, workers were reminded to improve the quality of their direct work practice with a child.

Case 2 – Social care complaint was not upheld regarding the level of support received and intervention of Children’s services.

Case 3 – Education complaint was not upheld regarding the safeguarding procedure on school transport, as the team had followed due process.

Case 4 – Social care complaint regarding the social worker involvement in relation to the child’s care and support was still in progress.

Case 5 – Complaint regarding request for appropriate support for child and safeguarding concerns was still in progress.

Case 6 - Complaint regarding Children’s Services involvement and decision making for care placements and support was still in progress.

The number of complaints being escalated to stage 2 remains low, as detailed in Table 5 and 6. These low numbers reflect the considerable time and effort that is taken to try to resolve issues at stage 1.

Table 5 Stage 2 escalation rates for complaints 2022/23

Service	Stage 1	Stage 2	% escalation
Education/SEN	17	2	12%
Children’s social care	39	7	18%
Total	56	9	16%

Table 6 Stage 2 escalation rates by year

Service	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21
Education/SEN	12%	14%	100%
Children’s social care	18%	25%	33%
Total	16%	22%	44%

4.3. Stage 3 complaints

There were no stage 2 social care complaints escalated to stage 3 review panel during 2022/23, which is consistent with the previous year. This is mainly due to the low number of complaints investigated at stage 2 and in the quality of outcomes.

5. Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman

The Ombudsman is the final stage of the complaint process following the completion of the Council's own complaint procedure, although a person can make contact at any time during the progress of their complaint.

The Ombudsman considered eight complaints during this reporting period. Three complaints were not investigated as being premature or not within the Ombudsman's jurisdiction. Below is a summary of the six complaints with investigations, including complaints open from the previous year.

Table 7

Service	Complaint	Outcome	Remedy
SENARS	Delay in the EHCP process and not securing a school place	Fault (maladministration and injustice) regarding the delay	Apology Financial redress Learning
Social Care	Services failed to act on parent's concerns regarding daughter's welfare	Fault (maladministration) as a result of delays in handling complaint	Apology Financial Redress Learning
School Admissions	The appeal process was flawed	No fault identified in the process of handing the appeal.	Not applicable
Contact & Assessment	Level of social care intervention and alleged false statements	Investigation in progress	
Contact & Assessment	Section 47 Enquiry was not completed properly and failure to provide adequate support for the child	Investigation in progress	
SENARS	Not making all the provisions under section F of the EHCP	Investigation in progress	

6. Learning from complaints

Complaints are a valuable source of information, which identify lessons that can be learnt as a means of service improvement. Children's services are committed to continuous service improvement.

The SENAR service acknowledges the issues experienced with delays with the EHCP process and is working to increase staff capacity and resource support to address this.

The key learning shared with teams in 2022/23 is detailed below:

The importance of ensuring that **young care leavers are consulted** in formulating and updating their Pathway plan.

To complete annual reviews and Education, Health and Care plans in a **timely manner, in line with the statutory requirements**.

To inform a parent within six weeks of the transfer of the Education, Health and Care plan when the Council intends to complete a review and when it intends to conduct a review of the child's needs.

Accurate and timely case recording to document all communications between the worker and families.

Ensuring **families are kept updated** and informed to avoid unnecessary delay and distress.

Improving **timeliness of actions and responses**, to avoid unnecessary delay or outside legal requirements.

Clear communication, to explain processes and decisions and in a timely way.

Social workers to **review their direct work practice**, to ensure that lessons are learnt going forward.

Reminder to staff to **adhere to the statutory timescales regarding referrals** to children's social care services and the complaints policy.

Examples of what the service put right as a result of a complaint, are detailed below:

Complaint – A carer raised concerns about the Staying Put arrangements that were in place to support the young person, who was a university student.

What the service did - The concerns were referred to the Harrow Placement Team to review the Staying Put policy, to ensure arrangements are in place for any relevant Looked After young people, at least three months before their 18th birthday. This is monitored closely by the Corporate Parenting Service.

Complaint - Concerns raised regarding the access to Children's Centres when acting in capacity of 'a parent'.

What the service did – Staff for Harrow Early Years were reminded that nannies should have same access as a grandparent, aunty or other family member bringing their children to the centres.

Complaint - Care leaver raised concerns regarding her accommodation and not being supported for her health and wellbeing, and her Pathway plan not being discussed with her.

What the service did – Supported the young person with identifying new accommodation and the worker updated the Pathway plan to reflect the young person's needs. Staff were reminded of the importance of ensuring care leavers were consulted and included with the update of their pathway plans.

7. MP and Member Enquiries

The Children's Services Directorate recorded 51 Member of Parliament (MP) enquiries and 45 Elected Member enquiries during 2022/23.

In total, 96 MP and Member enquiries were recorded by the complaints team in 2022/23, as compared to 77 enquiries in the previous year.

All enquiries are directed to the complaints team to ensure they are logged and tracked for a timely response.

Table 8 Summary of issues raised with MPs and Elected members.

MP issues	Number	Member issues	Number
School Admission	20	School Admission	25
Welfare/housing	4	Welfare/Housing	5
Safeguarding	2	Social care support	5
School Transport	1	School concerns	1
School exclusions	1	Unauthorised leave	1
Accommodation support	1	Alleged harassment by social care staff	1
Deportation concern	2	Weekend use of school facilities	1
School issues	4	OT provision	1
Bullying in school	1	EHCP/SEN provision	1
EHCP/SEN provision	7	s.7 court report	1
Change of Social Worker	1	Early Years support	1
Social care support	7	s.17/s47 Assessment	2
Total	51	Total	45

As shown in Table 8, school admissions received the most enquiries from MPs and Members during 2022/23, with parents concerned to ensure their child received their preferred school.

Providing timely responses remained a key priority for MP and Member enquiries during 2022/23. Encouragingly, 77% of MP enquiries were responded in 5 –10 working days and 88% of Member enquiries were responded within 5-10 working days by the final quarter period of 2022/23.

Enquiries that were complex and/or sensitive by their nature required detailed consideration. Where appropriate, if the issues raised by a constituent require formal investigation and meet the eligibility criteria under the relevant complaint process, they will be investigated as a complaint, with a copy of the response shared with the relevant MP or Member.

8. Compliments

Children's services recorded 21 compliments for the reporting year. Some examples of the positive feedback are detailed below.

What they said...

It was lovely seeing you at the meeting this morning as well. I wanted to thank you for all the help you have been providing to my daughter. I really appreciate all your useful information and support. Thank you once again. **Children's Sensory Team**

I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your support over the past weeks with M's case and for enabling a smooth transition promptly. I also want to highlight how you dealt with the case sensitively and for advocating for M to continue his existing care package and services in LB Harrow.

Children & Young Adult 0-25 Disability

I would like to thank you for all the help and indeed support you have given to myself and the boys, going that extra mile to help us was always what made you stand out. The world would be a much better place if there were more people like you, you are a true credit to your profession. It has been a real pleasure to have worked with you. God bless you. **Fostering and Permanence Team**

Thank you for all the great work you do for deaf children and young people.
Children's Sensory Team

There's no words that I can find truly in order to appreciate your great efforts for all of us and the community. From bottom of our heart, we would like to say Thank you so much. **School Admissions Team**

Just to let you know that we have had X's assessment and now getting portage set up as home visits. Got some great coping mechanisms from occupational too. Thanks for all your help. **Cedars Hub**

I wanted to write to you to commend the social work practice of A. We have just finished a difficult case in which A was fair, kind and transparent in her work with the parents. She was always willing to discuss issues with me, kept me updated and sought my views when necessary. A visited the child regularly and continued to deal with all the safeguarding risks in an appropriate and timely way. It has been a pleasure working with A, and I know more importantly that the mother benefited from having her consistent social work skills throughout a lengthy case.

Child in Need team

9. Objectives for 2023/24

The complaints team will continue to ensure the operation of the complaint procedures is robust and in line with the statutory requirements and that it effectively monitors performance. The effectiveness of the complaint procedures depends on the wider organisational culture, with a key focus on resolving issues and improving outcomes.

Improving complaint and Member/MP response times will be an ongoing priority with support from senior staff.

The service target has been set to ensure 75% of complaints are responded on time.

The complaints team will continue to work with all service teams to identify and address areas of learning from complaints for service improvement.

Training and refresher sessions will be ongoing for Managers and their teams on effective complaints handling and ensuring quality complaint responses and handling complex cases.