

# Complaints and Compliments

## Annual Report for 2020/21



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## **1 Background**

Every local authority with a responsibility for children's social care services is required to produce an annual report outlining the complaints activity for the service. Responsibility for the complaints function is shared between Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) who facilitate Stage 1 of the complaints procedure and Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC) who provide the role of Statutory Complaints Manager to manage any complaints which do not get resolved at Stage 1. The Statutory Complaints Manager provides advice and guidance when required at any stage in the process. The roles of SMBC and SCT are clearly documented in a Service Level Agreement (SLA) and both work closely together to provide a seamless service to our customers.

This is the third annual report produced by the SCT which includes a detailed analysis of compliments, complaints and informal feedback made by children, to embed a culture of continuous learning from complaints. This report covers the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

## **2 Statutory Complaints Procedure and Local Government Ombudsman**

The majority of representations that SCT receives regarding the functions of Children's Social Care fall under the statutory complaints procedure. The procedure is defined in *The Children's Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006*. The statutory procedure allows for Children and Young People "to make representations, including complaints about the actions, decisions or apparent failings of a local authority's children's social services provision; and to allow any other appropriate person to act on behalf of the Child or Young Person concerned or make a complaint in their own right" (Getting the Best from Complaints, DfE, 2006).

Not all complaints regarding Children's Social Care fall under the statutory procedure, although the majority do. The statutory complaints procedure has three stages once a representation has been accepted as a statutory complaint.

### **2.1 Stage 1 - Local Resolution**

The aim is to resolve as many complaints as possible at this early stage. The Team Manager should discuss the complaint with the complainant and attempt to address the issues as quickly as possible. They should exchange information and thinking behind decisions and try to agree a way forward. This should take up to 10 working days, with a maximum extension of up to 20 working days for complex complaints.

### **2.2 Mediation**

SCT offers mediation where a complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of their Stage 1 complaint and may request a Stage 2 investigation. Mediation takes place between the complainant and a Senior Manager from the relevant service area, it is not compulsory but is offered in efforts to resolve any outstanding issues for the complainant as quickly as

possible. If a complainant chooses not to accept mediation, then their complaint will be considered as a Stage 2 complaint.

### **2.3 Stage 2 - Investigation**

When a complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of Stage 1, they may request a Stage 2 investigation. The investigation is conducted by an external Investigating Officer who is accompanied by an Independent Person, whose role is to ensure that the investigation is open, transparent and fair. Both officers complete a report following the investigation which is passed onto a senior manager within SCT (Adjudicating Officer) for the adjudication process.

The Adjudicating Officer then considers the reports and responds to the complainant on behalf of SCT. The Stage 2 process should be completed within 25 working days, although this timescale can be extended to 65 working days for complex complaints.

### **2.4 Stage 3 - Review Panel**

Following a full Stage 2 investigation a complainant can request that their complaint is considered further by a review panel. The panel consists of two independent persons, plus an independent chair. Following a review meeting, the panel make recommendations to the Chief Executive who then decides on the complaint and any actions needed and sends a final response to the complainant on behalf of SCT. The review panel should be held within 30 working days of the request. Within five working days of the review panel meeting, the Independent Chair will send a letter to the Chief Executive, outlining the panel's findings and recommendations and the Director of Operations will then provide SCT's final response within a further 15 working days. The whole process should take a maximum of 50 working days.

### **2.5 Local Government Ombudsman (LGO)**

At the end of the three stages of the complaints process the complainant has the right to escalate their concerns to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman for consideration. SCT can request an early referral to the Local Government Ombudsman at any stage of the complaints procedure.

## **3 The Complaints Service**

SMBC are responsible for processing complaints on SMBC's complaints management system to ensure that all complaints for SCT are accurately recorded and monitored through the system. SCT allocate all Stage 1 complaints to appropriate managers within the service and ensure they are responded to.

SMBC are responsible for the management of all Stage 2, Stage 3 and Ombudsman complaints that are received.

### 3.1 Total Number of Individual Complaints Received

During the reporting year SCT received 213 complaints which were dealt with at Stage 1. This is a decrease of 21% (57 complaints) compared to the previous reporting year.

### 3.2 How Complaints Have Been Received

Complaints are recorded by SMBC on the system known as 'Contact Us', as part of the complaints SLA shared between SMBC and SCT. Customers can choose to create their own portal account known as 'MySandwell' on Contact Us which enables them to register a complaint directly through their account. Once an account is set up customers are then able to access this at any time to view progress on the complaint and see the response once it has been responded to.

### 3.3 Who Made Complaints

A large majority of the complaints received continue to be made by adults who are expressing their dissatisfaction with the service provided by children's social care.

There were 40 complaints received from Young People during 2020/21 either made by themselves or via an Advocate – this is an increase of six complaints made by Children and Young People in comparison to the previous year.

## 4 Stage 1 Complaints

Table 1 below shows a breakdown of the total number of complaints received during the reporting year and the outcome of complaint investigations. There have been 57 fewer complaints received during 2020/21 than the previous reporting year. There has also been a 10% decrease in the number of Stage 1 complaints that were upheld/party upheld in 2020/21 from the previous year.

Year	No. of Stage 1 complaints	Upheld/Partly Upheld	%
2020/21	213	134	63%
2019/20	270	198	73%
2018/19	263	144	55%

Table 1 Outcome of Stage 1 investigations

### 4.1 Breakdown of Stage 1 Complaints By Service Area

Below is a breakdown of the 213 Stage 1 complaints received by service area.

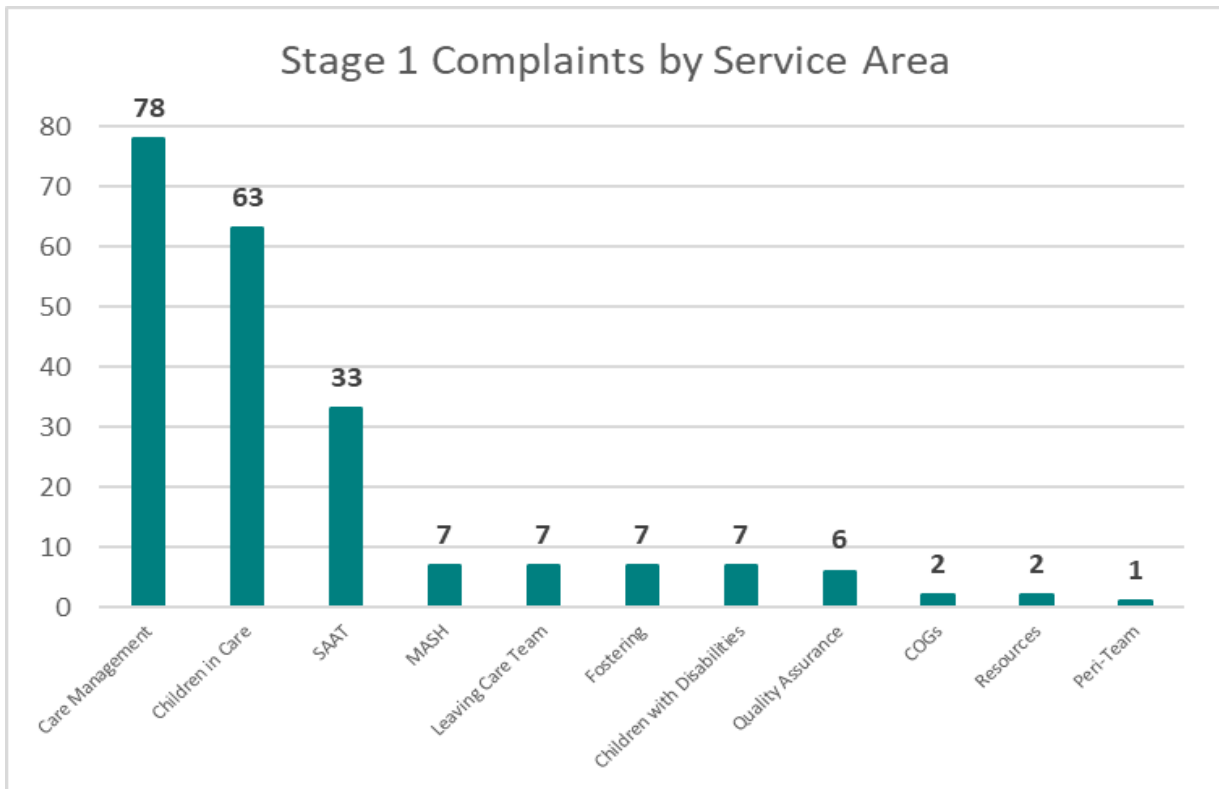


Table 2 Complaints by service area

The majority of complaints have been received by the Care Management Service, who also held the highest number of cases during 2020/21. However, the Children in Care Service received a higher proportion of complaints (9.8% complaints received) against the number of cases they held compared to Care Management who received 4.7% complaints against cases held. This will be further explored within the Children in Care service area.

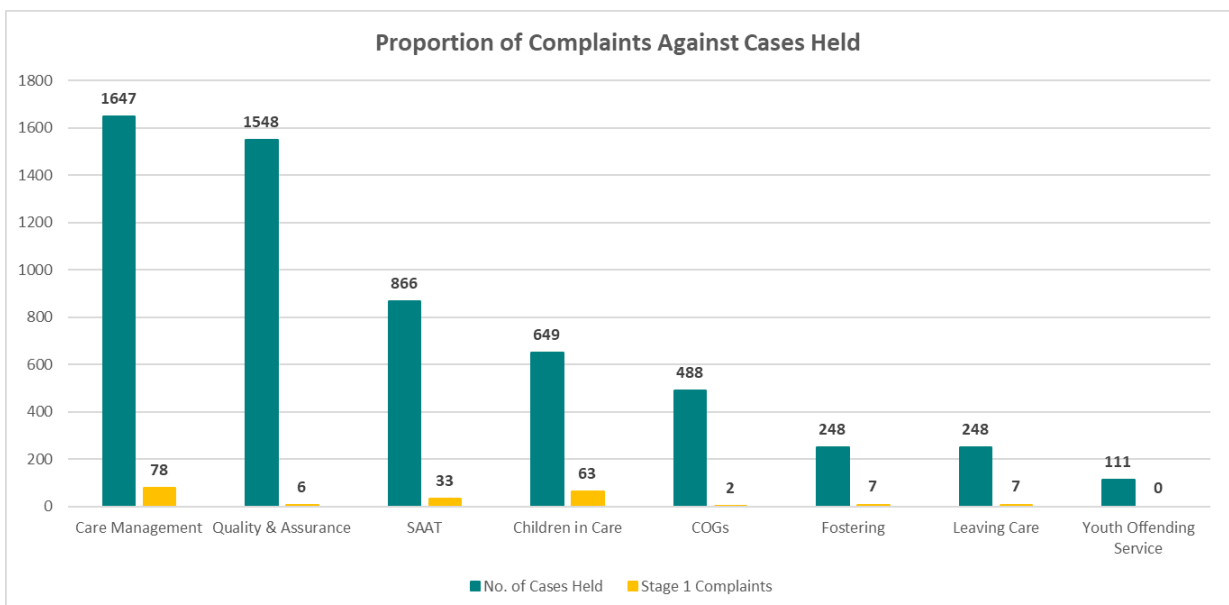


Table 3 Proportion of complaints against cases held

## 4.2 Monthly Trend for Receiving Complaints

Analysis of the total number of Stage 1 complaints per month for 2020/21 in comparison to 2019/20 seems to suggest that complaints have generally followed a similar trend with regards increase and decrease in demand according to the time of year, however there is no significant correlation between the numbers of complaints received between reporting years.

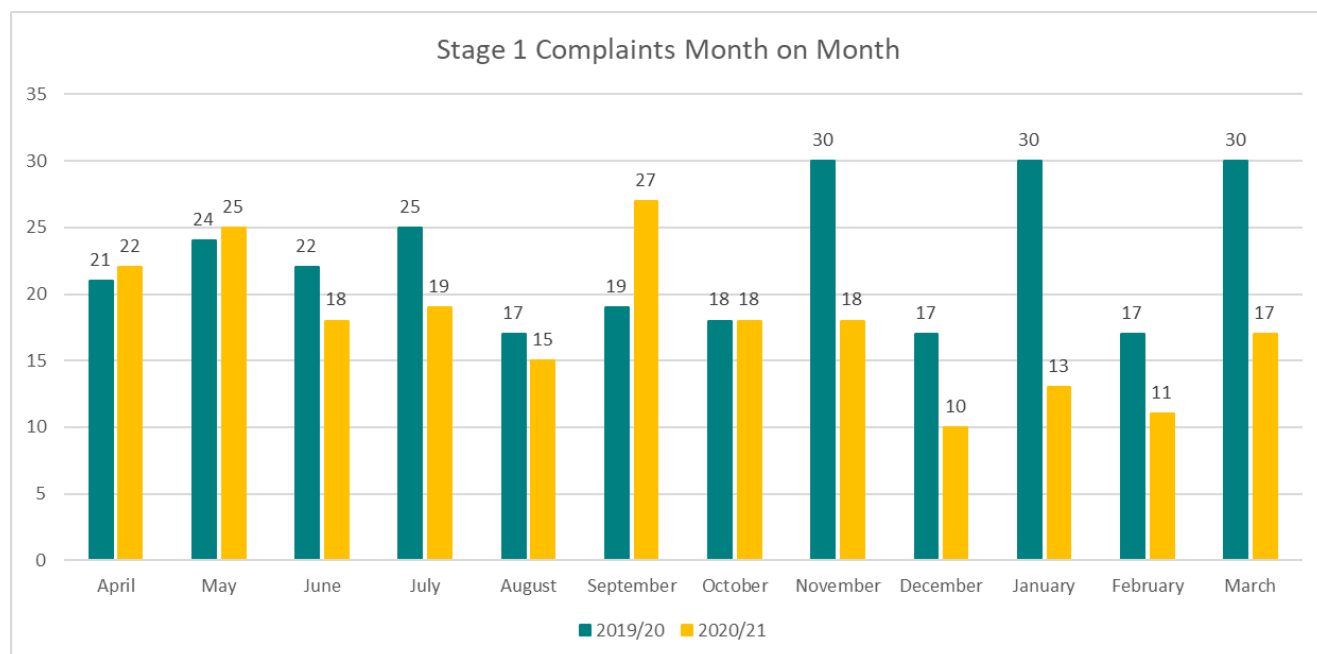


Table 4 Number of Stage 1 complaints received during 2019/20 and 2020/21 by month

## 4.3 Repeat Complainants

SCT received two or more complaints from 17 people during 2020/21 (see Table 5 below). The number of repeat complainants has declined for two years running, which is positive and is demonstrative of our efforts to respond to complaints right first time, meaning more people are satisfied with the outcome of their Stage 1 complaint.

No. of people making more than one complaint	Number of complaints made
17	2
2	3
1	4

Table 5 Repeat complainants



#### 4.4 Compliance with Timescales

Table 6 provides a breakdown of whether the timescales were either met or missed, for the 213 Stage 1 complaints received between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.

Stage 1 Timescales 20/21	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total No. Of Complaints	Percentage
Timescale Met	57	47	40	34	178	84%
Timescale Missed	8	14	6	7	35	16%

Table 6 Stage 1 compliance against timescales

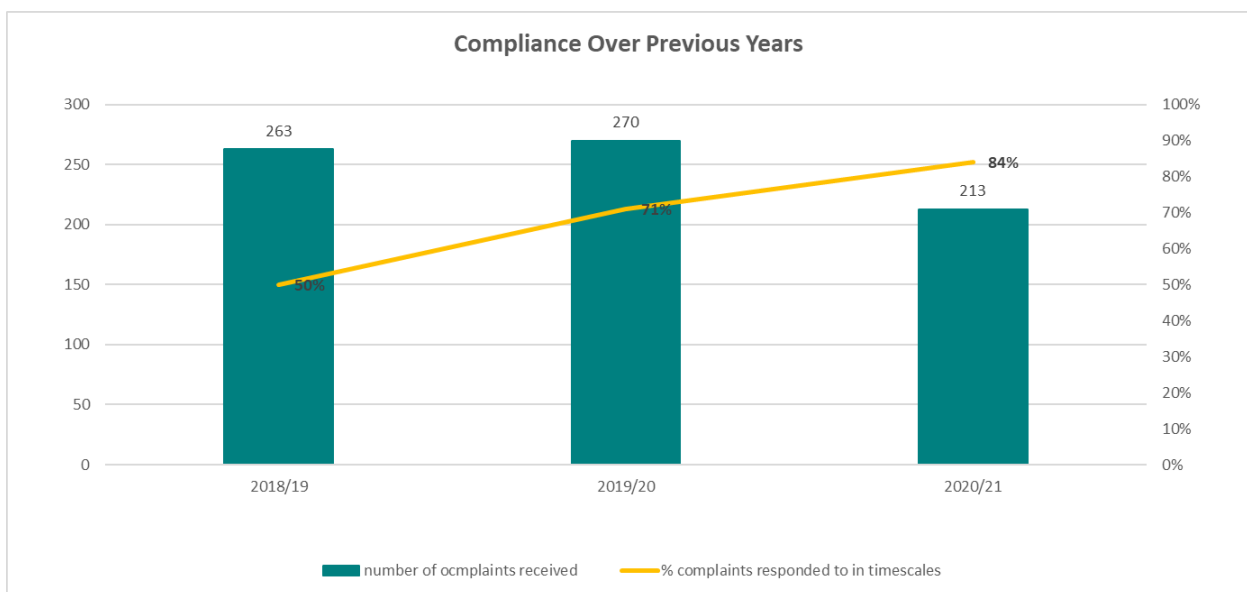


Table 7 comparison of complaints responded to within timescales over previous years

During 2020/21, 84% of Stage 1 complaints were dealt with within statutory timescales. This is an improvement in comparison to performance the previous reporting year, which was 71%, and a significant improvement compared with complaints received during 2018/19, where just 50% of complaints were responded to within timescale.

Reasons for improved compliance in timescales include:

- Sustaining the changes made to our business processes as part of improvement work commencing in 2019
- Improved levels of support offered to Managers in responding to complaints
- Improved mechanism for performance reporting of complaints information, meaning Managers are more aware of their team's performance.

## Breakdown of Timescales to Respond to Stage 1 Complaints

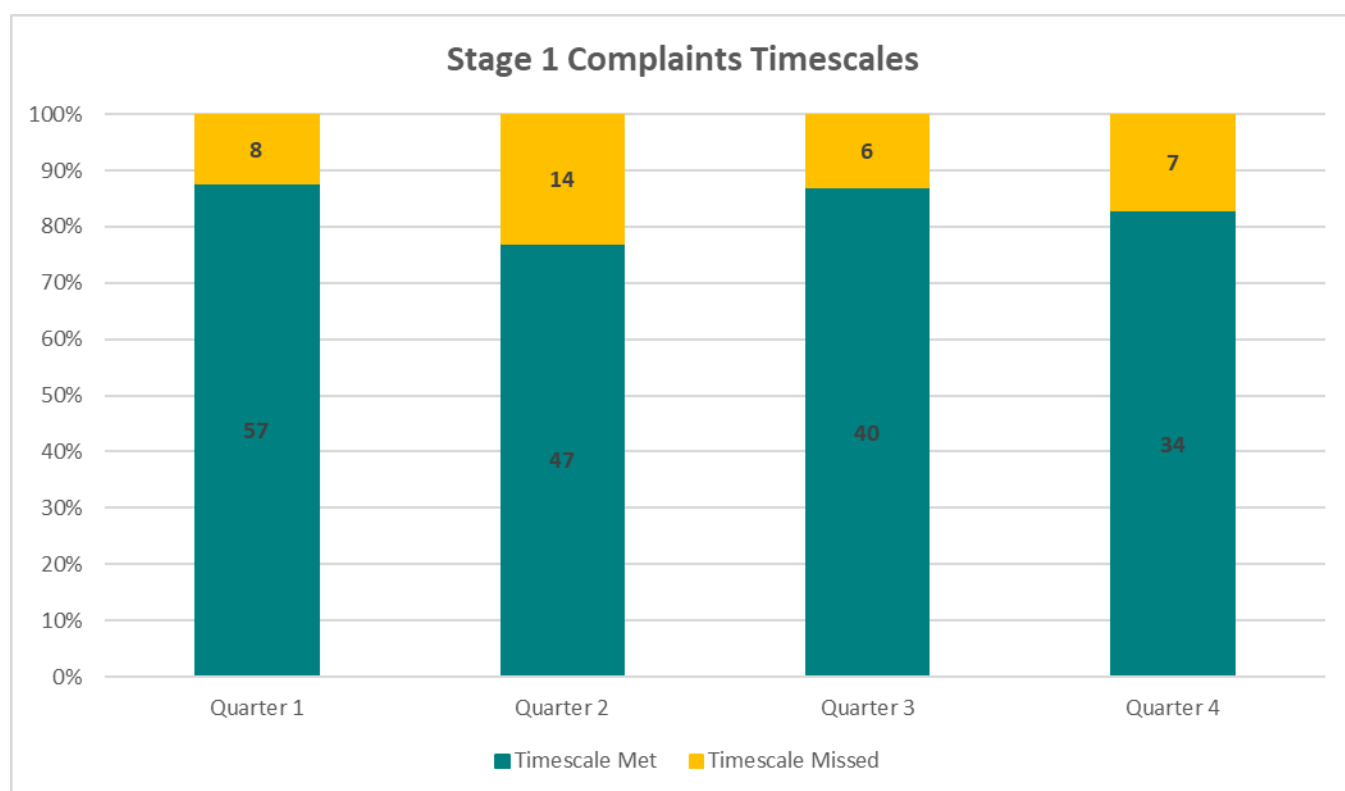


Table 8 Breakdown of timescales to respond to Stage 1 complaints

Performance for responding to complaints in timescale dipped in quarter 2 of 2020/21 by 11% but picked up again in the final two quarters. The dip in compliance for quarter two can largely be attributed to the direct impact of Covid-19 on frontline services during that time period.

## 5 Complaints and Informal Feedback from Children and Young People

### 5.1 Complaints from Children and Young People

When Children and Young People contact us to make a complaint, the Participation Team play a key role in providing advocacy support to them throughout the process. The Participation Team also follow-up with Children and Young People at the end of the complaints process, undertaking work to ensure that we are closing the loop and making sure that Children and Young People feel they have been listened to and their concerns taken seriously.

SCT continue to use the Mind of My Own app as a mechanism to encourage feedback from Children and Young People. The SCT management team have commissioned another year of the app, and plans are in place to refresh and launch the app during 2021/22.

## 5.2 Analysis of Formal Complaints

During 2020/21 SCT received 40 complaints from Children and Young People, either directly from them or via an advocate; this is six more complaints than the previous year.

In all cases, the Child or Young Person were either contacted by the Participation Team to offer support, or the Children's Society Advocacy Service if the complaint was made through them.

Weekly meetings take place between the Participation Team and the Customer Experience Team to track complaints made by Children and Young People and deal with any issues arising which need to be escalated or resolved.

The learning and themes raised through Children and Young People's complaints are shared in several forums, including:

- through Trust Communication channels
- through the Practitioner Improvement Board
- through the Practice Learning Forum
- shared with the Quality Assurance Service, triangulating with findings from audits and performance data
- shared with Learning & Development
- and shared with the Voices of Sandwell Board and the Care Leavers Forum.

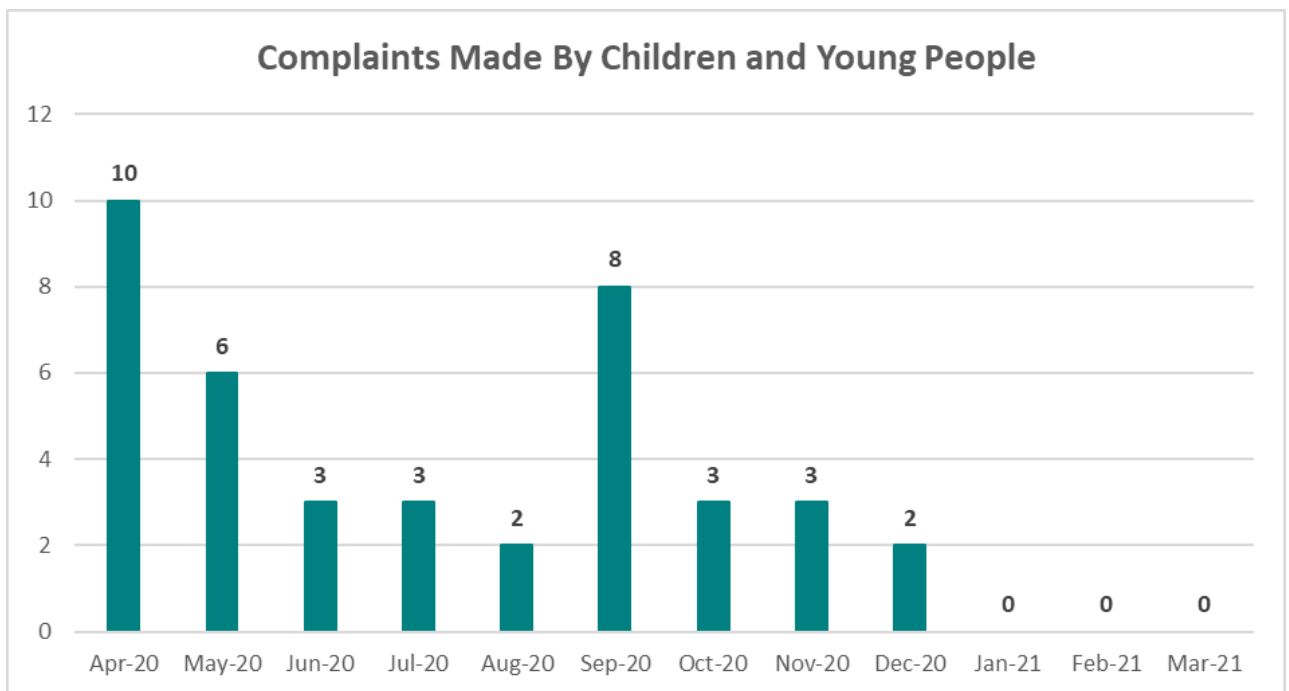


Table 9 Complaints made by Children and Young People

In all cases, the Child or Young Person were either contacted by the Participation Team to offer support or supported by Children’s Society Advocacy Service if the complaint was made via an advocate. Closing the loop activity was undertaken at the end of the complaints process for each complaint to ensure that Children and Young People were satisfied that their complaint had been responded to and actions completed.

### 5.3 Analysis of Themes of Formal Complaints

The themes identified from the 40 children’s complaints during 2020/21 are:

Complaint Theme	No. of Complaints Received
Actions / Conduct of Worker	5
Decision Making	5
Financial Assistance	5
Not Feeling Listened To	5
Placement Change	5
Lack of Support	4
Family Time	3
Delay in sharing minutes/reports	2
Poor Communication	2
Change of Social Worker	1
Issue with Carer	1
Quality of Service	1
Support with Social Media	1

Table 10 Themes of children’s formal complaints

Through tracking the actions of children’s complaints, we have highlighted that there is further work to do in the following areas:

- Continue sharing the learning from complaints made by Children and Young People. Engage with and share the learning with existing forums such as the Social Work and Practice Forum
- Work closely with the Advocacy Service to receive regular updates on the cases they are dealing with, and to better inform our closing the loop activity.

#### Actions / Conduct of Worker

A total of five complaints received from Children and Young People concerned the actions or conduct of their practitioner. Issues raised include:

- Unhappy with a previous Social Worker
- Young Person unhappy with how their Social Worker communicated with them
- Unhappy with the actions of their Social Worker regarding issues raised about placement and information contained within their records
- Feeling frustrated with the Social Worker for not progressing issues raised quickly enough

### **Decision Making**

We received five complaints from Children and Young People regarding our decision making. Issues raised include:

- Unhappy with the decision made by Social Worker regarding purchase of a video game
- Unhappy with decision made by Social Worker regarding body piercing
- Unhappy with decisions made by their placement
- Unhappy with decision to change their Social Worker

### **Financial Assistance**

Five complaints were made by Children and Young People in relation to financial assistance. Issues raised include:

- Complaint about the difference in independent living allowance received in other authorities
- Missing savings whilst in care
- Payment of university fees

### **Not Feeling Listened To**

Five complaints were made by Children and Young People in relation to not feeling listened to. Issues raised include:

- Does not feel listened to by their Carer regarding having a mobile phone
- Young Person does not feel listened to when it concerns decisions being made at their placement
- Young Person does not feel listened to by their Social Worker

### **Placement Change**

A total of five complaints received from Children and Young People regarding their placement. Issues raised include:

- Young Person unhappy with arrangements made for placement move
- Feeling unsupported with living arrangements
- Unhappy with the decision made to remove from Carers

### **Lack of support**

A total of four complaints received from Children and Young People were around feeling unsupported. Issues raised include:

- Feeling frustrated with arrangements for delivering their siblings Christmas presents
- Feeling unsupported by their Social Worker with their feelings regarding their placement and lack of friends
- Feeling unsupported by their Social Worker in accessing health services

- Feeling unsupported in progressing previous issues raised around driving licence application and their Social Worker

### **Family Time**

Three complaints were made by Children and Young People regarding family time. The issues raised are:

- Unhappy with the arrangements for family time with their children
- Young Person expressed desire to have family time with members of his family

### **Delay in Sharing Minutes/Report**

We received two complaints from Children and Young People concerned about delays in receiving paperwork. Issue raised include:

- Complaint received around lack of lifestory work
- Complaint received around lack of documents including bus pass and passport

### **Poor Communication**

We received two complaints from Children and Young People concerned about poor communication. Issue raised include:

- Social Worker not informing of details about meetings in a timely way
- Poor communication regarding progressing citizenship application

### **Change of Social Worker**

We received one complaint from a Young Person concerned that their Social Worker had been changed without any notice given.

### **Issue with Carer**

We received one complaint where a Young Person made a complaint against their Carer.

### **Quality of Service**

We received one complaint from a Young Person who raised a complaint concerning several issues about the care they were receiving and their Social Worker.

### **Support with Social Media**

We received one complaint from a Young Person who raised a concern regarding removal of content previously uploaded onto a social media platform.

## **5.4 Analysis of Informal Feedback**

During 2020/21 23 Children and Young People contacted us to provide informal feedback, this is a 30% decrease compared to the previous reporting year.

Informal feedback is defined as an expression of dissatisfaction made by any channel other than the formal complaints process. Feedback can be made in person, online through Mind of My Own, I say or via the telephone.

In all instances of informal feedback, the Young Person was contacted by the Participation Team or Social Worker, this initial contact ensured that:

- The child was aware of their rights
- The nature of the feedback was understood and agreed by Young Person and Participation Team
- The Participation Team explained the process to the Young Person

## 5.5 Analysis of Themes of Informal Feedback from Children and Young People

Informal Feedback Theme	Feedback Received
Loneliness/Anxiety	5
Placement Change	4
Change of Social Worker	3
Not Feeling Listened To	3
Self-Harm	3
Bereavement	1
Bullying	1
Education	1
Financial Assistance	1
Violence & Aggression	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>

Table 11 Themes of children's informal feedback

The Participation Team will identify an issue raised by Children and Young People and determine whether they are expressing dissatisfaction. The informal feedback will be dealt with by the practitioner to resolve the concern raised, and the Participation Team will undertake closing the loop activity at the end of the process. This includes contacting the Young Person to find out about their experience and if they feel satisfied with both the process and the outcome.

## 5.6 Learning from Children's Formal Complaints and Informal Feedback

Below is a summary of the learning from both formal complaints and informal feedback received during 2020/21.

Theme of Complaint / Feedback	Learning Identified
<b>Actions / Conduct of the Worker</b>	<p>It is important that all staff are fully aware of the criteria for Young People to access Leaving Care services and for them to be clear on the type of service they can expect.</p> <p>Information about the Leaving Care Service has been shared with staff through team briefings. Employees also promote the</p>

Theme of Complaint / Feedback	Learning Identified
	<p>Local Offer for Care Leavers, which is also available on the Trust's website.</p> <p>We must ensure that any decisions that are made are clearly communicated and recorded on Young People's files, with a rationale provided if there is an exception to any circumstances to a Young Person receiving services from SCT.</p> <p>We have reiterated this important message through existing Trust Communication channels and team meetings.</p> <p>We must ensure that every effort is made for Young People to attend their Children in Care Review Meetings.</p> <p>This message was shared across the Trust and in specific team meetings and our audits evidenced that Children and Young People are encouraged to participate in their reviews so that they can contribute to their plans and actively participate in achievement of outcomes.</p> <p>Reflective discussions are also held with Social Workers to reflect on the learning from complaints and identify what we could have done differently to ensure that mistakes are not repeated in the future.</p> <p>Learning and any identified service improvements resulting from complaints are being progressed jointly alongside the Quality Assurance Service.</p>
<b>Decision Making</b>	<p>It is important that we listen when Young People are telling us of their wishes and feelings about their current placements. This avoids additional anxiety or distress for the Young Person. It also reassures the Young Person that we do listen to their views and helps build and maintain good relationships.</p> <p>Employees have attended briefing sessions around SCT's Purpose, Ethos and Standards which reiterate how we should work with our children and families. We will also take forward learning and any identified service improvements resulting from complaints alongside the Quality Assurance Service.</p>
<b>Financial Assistance</b>	<p>Where there are changes to policy regarding payments, it is crucial that these changes are communicated in a timely way</p>



Theme of Complaint / Feedback	Learning Identified
	<p>to avoid causing anxiety and to ensure that Young People are aware of plans moving forward.</p> <p>This information was communicated across the Trust and discussed in service and team meetings. We must ensure that Young People are aware of how much savings they are entitled to and have each year, so when they turn 18 we are aware of how much each Young Person will receive - this action should be captured during Children in Care reviews.</p> <p>A project group has been established that is looking into how Savings for Children and Young People are managed, in order to avoid similar complaints in the future.</p>
<b>Not feeling listened to</b>	<p>We recognise that we must clearly explain to Children and Young People the different ways in which they can contact us.</p> <p>During 2020/21 we have significantly improved our website to make it easier for Children and Young People to contact us and access relevant information. We also developed simple guidance aimed at Children and Young People explaining how to make a complaint and what they should expect when they do make contact with us.</p> <p>We must ensure that when we are communicating with children and Young People that we allow them to be able to express themselves without interruption. This will ensure that Young People feel confident in sharing their feelings and wishes with us, and feedback to us any concerns they may have.</p> <p>It is important to engage with our partners early to work together in providing solutions for Children and Young People.</p> <p>We ensure that Young People are made aware of how they can tell us how they are feeling, good and bad, through using Mind of My Own. The use of this platform is encouraged at reviews, and is promoted internally through existing communication channels, induction and training. This is also discussed with our Children and Young People's through the various forums in place.</p>
<b>Placement Change</b>	<p>In order to ensure that Social Workers share consistent advice to Foster Carers, relevant policies and procedures were shared across SCT to ensure that Foster Carers who express an interest in becoming adopters are made fully aware of the scope and remit of what support is available.</p>

<b>Theme of Complaint / Feedback</b>	<b>Learning Identified</b>
	<p>Where Young People are telling us that they wish to remain with their current Carers, we must listen and support where appropriate to do so.</p> <p>Work has been undertaken with the Voices of Sandwell forum around matching Young People to the right foster placement. Matching certificates were introduced once the right placement has been identified. This aims to minimise the number of placement breakdowns and ensure the Young Person can thrive in their new placement.</p>
<b>Lack of Support</b>	<p>We must ensure that Children and Young People feel they are supported in having their needs met and feelings understood.</p> <p>This key message will be further explored within the newly established Social Worker and Practitioner forum. The work we do as part of Feedback Fortnight also gauges how well Children and Young People feel listened to. The learning from these events is shared across SCT and any service improvements identified as a result are taken forward by the relevant service area.</p>
<b>Family Time</b>	<p>Parents' own history and life experiences are a crucial part of any assessment undertaken by SCT. It is therefore important that Parents feel part of the decision making for their own Children and understand why it is important that their own involvement with us must be considered and assessed. This will help assure Young People that we are not working against them but will help us in assessing the impact of their experiences upon their caring ability and level of needs as parents.</p> <p>The identified learning within this theme will be further explored within the newly established Social Worker and Practitioner forum.</p>

<p><b>Delay in Sharing Minutes / Reports</b></p>	<p>We must ensure we are proactive in progressing applications for key identification documents such as passport applications, in order to avoid delay and disappointment for Children and Young People.</p> <p>We are exploring the option of broadening the staff group who currently use procurement cards across all relevant parts of the service as a means of speeding up applications for key documentation such as citizenship applications and passport applications.</p>
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<p><b>Theme of Complaint / Feedback</b></p>	<p><b>Learning Identified</b></p>
	<p>It is crucial that Lifestory books and work alongside Later in Life Letters are completed in a timely way and in line with supporting Children and Young People in understanding their life journey.</p> <p>This message has been shared across the service via existing communication channels and discussed within team and service meetings.</p>
<p><b>Poor Communication</b></p>	<p>Social Workers not informing Children and Young People of details about meetings in a timely way</p> <p>Young People should not feel that decisions are being made about them without their input. We must also work hard to ensure that Pathway Plans are completed to a good standard and consider the views of Young People, including what they want to do with their future. We must ensure that Children and Young People have what they need to make sure their meetings or appointments can happen as they should.</p> <p>This key learning will be further explored within the newly established Social Worker and Practitioner forum.</p>

<p><b>Change of Social Worker</b></p>	<p>We must ensure that where there is a change in Social Worker that there is an appropriate handover between the current Social Worker and the new Social Worker. Where this cannot be done, it is important that the Team Manager ensures that the Young Person is informed as soon as possible.</p> <p>Where Young People feedback that they are unhappy with decisions made and wish to change their Social Worker, it is important that we listen and where possible act upon it. Where a change in Social Worker is unavoidable, then we must ensure that we effectively communicate this to Children and Young People so that they understand the decision-making process. Where possible, handovers must take place to avoid causing any anxiety for the Young Person, and to also enable the new Social Worker and Young Person to develop a strong relationship.</p> <p>In collaboration with the Voices of Sandwell Board and Practitioner Improvement Board (PIB), the Customer Experience Team and Participation Team have developed best practice guidance for changes of Social Worker, and a postcard and letter for departing and new Social Workers, available for different ages. The case transfer protocol has been revised to include the Child's Voice with a focus on handover and direct work sessions undertaken with Children and Young People when Social Workers leave the service. Updates have also been made to our child's file recording system to ensure Team Managers and Workers will not be able to progress to the next stage of the transfer without completing the checklist in the protocol.</p>
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## 6 Mediation

During 2020/21 we offered 21 complainants who wished to progress to a Stage 2 complaint the opportunity for mediation. Of the 21 requests:

- Two complainants withdrew their request to progress their complaint further
- Two complainants declined mediation and progressed onto a Stage 2 complaint
- Two went through mediation and continued to progress to a Stage 2
- 15 complaints were successfully resolved with no further action

Through mediation we have been able to resolve the majority of complainant's issues successfully without progressing onto a Stage 2 investigation. This means that we are achieving earlier resolution for our Children and Families which will in turn enable relationships between both SCT and our Children and Families to be strengthened.

The offer of mediation has also meant that SCT saved in the region of £52,500 during 2020/21 (based on average figure of £3,500 cost per Stage 2 complaint), which can be

reinvested in frontline services.

## 7 Stage 2 Complaints

During 2020/21 five Stage 2 complaint investigations were concluded. One of the five complaints had escalated to Stage 2 during 2018/19 however was suspended due to court action and concluded within this reporting year.

### 7.1 Compliance with Timescales

Four of the five Stage 2 complaints completed during 2020/21 were completed outside of timescales. The average number of days to respond to a Stage 2 complaint was 93 days, whilst this is outside of timescales it is a significant improvement in comparison to the previous reporting year, where the average Stage 2 complaint was completed within 209 days. Two of the complaints were particularly complex in nature, causing the investigation to take longer than the 65-day maximum timescale to conclude.

During 2020/21, the Complaints Lead and Complaints Manager at Sandwell MBC worked together to reduce the number of days taken to respond to Stage 2 investigations. This work will continue into the next reporting year to ensure compliance with statutory timescales in relation to Stage 2 complaints.

### 7.2 Cost of Stage 2 Investigations

The cost of Stage 2 complaints this year is £10,196, which is approximately £1,656 less than the previous year and includes one more Stage 2 investigation being undertaken this reporting year. There were two investigations where SMBC were able to use internal investigators at no cost to work alongside the Independent Person

Stage 2-By Service	Complaint	Date TOR signed	Date of Adjudication	Date closed	No of working days	Cost
Care Management	Person 1	23 July 20	14 Oct 20	14 Oct 20	57	£1,017
Care Management	Person 2	18 Aug 21	10 March 21	10 March 21	139	£6,445
Care Management	Person 3	27 Aug 20	3 Feb 21	3.Feb 21	88	£360
Children in Care	Person 4	8 Dec 20	21 Apr 21	21 Apr 21	89	£2,374
<b>Total</b>						<b>£10,196</b>

Table 12 above shows the costs for Stage 2 investigations concluded in 2020/21

## 8 Stage 3 Complaints

SCT received one request for a Stage 3 review panel during 2020/21, which was declined due to the request not meeting existing policy.

## 9 Local Government Ombudsman Complaints

The Ombudsman raised three matters with SCT during 2020/21, of which:

- For one complaint the Ombudsman stated they would not investigate and upheld the findings of the Stage 2 complaint
- For one complaint the Ombudsman deemed was outside of their jurisdiction and therefore, did not investigate
- For one complaint the Ombudsman investigated and found SCT/SMBC to be at fault. Recommendations were made which were implemented

Decision	Number of decisions against category
Upheld and recommendations accepted	1
Closed after initial enquiries - no further actions	2

Table 13 Outcome of Complaints raised with the Ombudsman 2020/21

### 9.1 Learning and Actions Taken Following Ombudsman Complaints

**Complaint One** - Complaint from Parents that SCT had carried out a flawed Child Protection investigation. The Ombudsman found SCT at fault for not adequately representing the Parent's views when competing the assessment. The Ombudsman also found fault that SCT had failed to provide the Parents with a copy of the assessment in sufficient time.

Following the learning from this complaint, SCT has made significant investment in embedding our practice framework and model, which includes a signs of safety approach to working with children and families. We want our assessments to be consistently robust, demonstrating greater professional curiosity and focus on understanding the root causes of presenting problems.

Use of our Practice Framework and Model will ensure that the quality of our assessments follows a logical sequence thereby reducing the chances of omission of any information, whilst maintaining the quality of information that is included in assessment and its analysis. Our core training offer, complimented by the recent introduction of reflective spaces and greater offer of support for managers and practitioners is evidence of our commitment towards improving the quality of overall practice, including assessments being undertaken with children and families.

We also issued communication across the Trust reminding Social Workers and Practitioners to ensure that relevant reports are sent to all participants well in advance of any meetings.

SCT also provided evidence to the Ombudsman of the apology issued to the Parents and a compensatory payment made of £250.

## 10 Analysis of Themes of Complaints

The table below identifies complaints categorised by theme.

Complaint Theme	No. of Complaints Received
Actions / Conduct of Worker	70
Decision Making	26
Poor Communication	17
Financial Assistance	15
Lack of support	15
Family Time	14
Accuracy of Assessment/Reports	10
Quality of service	9
Placement Changes	7
Not Feeling Listened To	6
Inappropriate Disclosure of Information	6
Delay in Receiving Services	6
Delays in sharing minutes/reports	5
Social Work Process	3
Social Media Concern	1
Issue with Carer	1
Change in Social Worker	1
Access to Services	1

Table 14 Breakdown of complaint themes 2020/21

Four of the top five themes of complaints received during 2020/21 are the same as those in the previous year. This tells us that we need to do more to learn from complaints with these specific themes. This will be addressed through improvement activity during 2021/22.

Table 15 below shows the top five complaints themes in 2020/21 where complaints have been either fully or partially upheld.

Theme 2019/20	Upheld/Part Upheld	Theme 2020/21	Upheld/Part Upheld
Actions / Conduct of Worker	49	Actions / Conduct of Worker	36
Poor Communication	24	Decision Making	17
Financial Assistance	20	Poor Communication	13
Lack of Support	18	Financial Assistance	11
Delay in Sharing Minutes / Report and Contact Arrangements	14	Lack of Support	9

Table 15 Top five themes – 2019/20 and 2020/21

## 11 Learning from Complaints

Learning from complaints continues to be a significant focus of improvement work during 2020/21. During this time, we have developed strong links with the Quality Assurance Service to ensure that learning from complaints is triangulated alongside other intelligence, including learning from audits and performance data and is ultimately informing practice improvement.

Whilst the themes of complaints are similar in nature to those of the previous year, it must be acknowledged that the impact of Covid-19, staff sickness and the high turnover of staff experienced by the Trust during this reporting year are all significant factors which have impacted upon how we learnt from complaints during 2020/21.

We have however worked more closely with service areas and Managers to share the learning and identify practice improvements. The Customer Experience Team are also leading on service improvement work alongside the Participation Team and other internal practice improvement forums. Work will continue into 2021/22 to ensure that learning from complaints is embedded throughout the Trust.



Below are some examples of learning from complaints received during 2020/21.

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Learning Identified and Improvements Made</b>
<b>Lack of clarity regarding request for financial support with university accommodation</b>	<p>Workers must be clear on SCT's policy in relation to the Care Leavers Offer in order to avoid causing confusion or offering conflicting advice to other Young People considering applying to university.</p> <p>An apology was issued to the Young Person affected. SCT policy in relation to university accommodation was re-issued across the Trust to ensure that all Practitioners and Managers are aware of what the policy reads and are aware of latest guidance.</p>
<b>Inaccurate information recorded within Single Assessments</b>	<p>We must continue to work hard to ensure timely outcome focused interventions for Children, Young People and Families. Strengthening assessments remains a focus for the service and continues to be reiterated within supervisions and team meetings supplemented by staff training and practice learning support.</p> <p>There has been a significant learning and development programme delivered across SCT during 2020/21 of which all aspects of completing assessments has featured heavily. Learning from this complaint has also featured as part of the Compliments and Complaints training that is delivered by the Customer Experience Team to Managers throughout the year.</p>
<b>To ensure that carers receive accurate payments for the care they provide. Ensure that this is done in a timely way</b>	<p>It is important to ensure that Foster Carers are aware of the policy regarding fees and that this is effectively communicated to manage their expectations. As a result of the complaint regarding inaccurate payment of fees, processes and procedures were put in place to prevent this from happening again and ensure that all carers receive the correct payments on the correct day.</p>
<b>Delays experienced in obtaining key identification documents, such as Passports</b>	<p>Whilst applications for certain key documentation such as passports were unfortunately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic we have reviewed and strengthened our practice and processes to mitigate these issues. This</p>

Issue	Learning Identified and Improvements Made
	<p>will ensure that Children and Young People have access to these documents in a timely way, and therefore do not feel anxious or worried.</p> <p>As part of our wider plan for continuing to embed learning from complaints, we will work with the operational service to review guidance and communicate any revised guidance to practitioners around the timeliness for completing applications for citizenships and passports.</p>
<p><b>It is important that children placed with family are assessed appropriately and within a timely manner.</b></p>	<p>During the reporting year, SCT delivered several teaching sessions Trust-wide around unregulated placements. The sessions raised awareness of unregulated placements and reinforced good practice.</p>
<p><b>Foster Carers looking to adopt need to be aware of the support available to them.</b></p>	<p>We must ensure that Foster Carers who express an interest in becoming Adopters are fully aware of the scope and remit of available support.</p> <p>SCT's Adoption Support Policy, dated 1st September 2020, was shared across the service to ensure Practitioners offer consistent advice to Foster Carers.</p>
<p><b>To ensure all contacts are recorded on the file in a timely and consistent way</b></p>	<p>The Child Protection process can be a stressful experience for families because of its statutory nature which can make families feel as though they have little control over the process or outcome. It is important that Professionals recognise this and do everything possible to ensure that the experience is productive in safeguarding children whilst also respecting families.</p> <p>Identified practice improvement has been around improving our Conference process - we have implemented a feedback questionnaire process for Families following conferences to ensure that they have an opportunity to raise any concerns.</p>
<p><b>Concerns raised by a Parent has highlighted the issue of practice in relation to Children's identity and culture is appropriate</b></p>	<p>There has been a focus on improving our understanding and inclusion of issues relating to culture, diversity and family traditions in our practice.</p> <p>Learning from this complaint informed staff development sessions within service areas, and reflective discussions have started to take place in team meetings and service events.</p> <p>As a workforce, SCT aims to be more sensitive, understanding and reflective of issues relating to diversity, and discussions are continually being held</p>

Issue	Learning Identified and Improvements Made
	<p>with a view to creating a more self-aware, supportive and progressive workforce.</p> <p>Our Practice Framework and Model also reinforces a relationship based and strength-based approach using principles of Trauma informed practice. Culture and diversity are at the heart of the framework under 'culture, identity and community'.</p>
<p><b>Complaint from a Young Person regarding Missing Savings whilst in care</b></p>	<p>We must ensure that all Young People are aware of how much savings they are entitled to. This should be captured during Children in Care reviews.</p> <p>As part of learning from complaints a project group was established during the reporting year which is focusing on missing savings, we are looking at how we record this information so that it can be obtained by the allocated workers for each Young Person. This will mean that Young People can be confident of how much money they are entitled to and that they receive this.</p>
<p><b>Delays experienced in responding to Subject Access Requests</b></p>	<p>A complaint received regarding delays in responding to a subject access request indicated that we need to provide a better service for people who wish to access their records. Responding to SARs in a timely way demonstrates a professional organisation with good customer service. People requesting their SARs should feel confident in the services we provide.</p> <p>As a result of this complaint we thoroughly reviewed our SAR processes and procedures in efforts to ensure that people are provided with their information in a timely way, and to a high standard.</p>
<p><b>Confidentiality with our conference call facilities</b></p>	<p>We must ensure that our Parents, Families and Partners feel confident in utilising our facilities.</p> <p>During the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic we responded quickly to change the way we worked with our Children, Families and other Professionals to enable us to deliver a seamless service during the nationwide lockdown. Unfortunately, we experienced an issue with the confidentiality of our conference call facilities. This was addressed through an immediate review of the safety and usage of conference calls for meetings.</p> <p>The review investigated the mechanism used for confidential meetings and considered whether any alternatives could be used or made more confidential.</p>

Issue	Learning Identified and Improvements Made
	<p>As a result, enhanced safety features were put in place to prevent a similar situation occurring again. A Trust-wide communication message was also sent highlighting the importance of being vigilant. As a result of this intervention Families and Partners were able to feel confident that meetings can take place virtually and confidentially.</p>
<p><b>Disruption to Family Time arrangements</b></p>	<p>The Covid-19 pandemic also impacted on our family time arrangements with Children and Families. At a time when specific restrictions were in place, family time was being facilitated in many ways to ensure that as many sessions went ahead as safely as possible, including virtually using available technology as well as visits in parks and other outside areas that were recognised as being safe in accordance within government guidelines during the pandemic.</p>
<p><b>Timeliness of sharing minutes and reports</b></p>	<p>We must ensure that minutes and reports are shared within the appropriate timescales, to allow Parents sufficient time to review before meetings. Internal processes and escalation points were identified to support this action.</p> <p>This message has been shared across the whole of SCT, including the monthly Compliments and Complaints training that the Customer Experience Team deliver to Managers.</p>
<p><b>Families not understanding why Social Workers are involved in their lives</b></p>	<p>We must ensure that Social Workers and Practitioners understand the importance of how they present themselves with Families, especially when first becoming involved with them, which is usually at times of crisis.</p> <p>The message around the importance of engagement and relationship building has been shared across SCT through communications and is being addressed through our approach to relationship-based practice.</p>
<p><b>Understanding the importance of Genograms</b></p>	<p>We must ensure that relationships are recorded correctly for Children, as it allows those working with Children and Families to understand the family network and ensure that the network positively influences appropriate intervention and the child's plan.</p> <p>It also avoids causing upset and distress for family members who read inaccurate or incorrect details about themselves and their family on their child's file.</p> <p>The importance of genograms in understanding family networks is explored through workshops delivered by the</p>

Issue	Learning Identified and Improvements Made
	<p>Quality Assurance Service as part of the core training offer, designed to support practitioners in planning and assessments.</p> <p>We have also communicated the importance of case recording as part of our weekly communications messages that are shared throughout the Trust and have shared this learning through attendance at service meetings.</p>

Learning from compliments and complaints is shared as part of regular training sessions delivered to Managers, as well as shared with Managers as part of their team meetings; we also share learning with the Practitioner Improvement Board.

In October 2020 SCT launched the first Feedback Fortnight event, which coincided with the National Customer Service feedback week. Feedback Fortnight is a bi-annual event and provides an opportunity for SCT to engage with our Children and Young People, Parents, Carers and Professionals to gauge how well we are doing and where we need to improve. The learning and findings from this activity is considered alongside learning from compliments and complaints and other quality assurance activity.

## 12 Compliments

Employees continue to be encouraged to share and acknowledge good practice; they continue to respond positively to this public acknowledgement of their hard work and dedication to improving outcomes for children families.

Compliments are received from our Young People, Parents, Carers and other Professionals as well as from colleagues in other areas of SCT.

### 12.1 Analysis of Compliments Received

During 2020/21 we received 378 compliments from Children and Young People, their Families, internal and external Professionals, the local community and local businesses. In comparison to the 295 compliments received during 2019/20, this is a 28% increase of the compliments received. This is the second year where we have seen an increase in the number compliments received.

We continued sharing and celebrating our compliments through the Covid-19 pandemic via virtual platforms. Virtual compliments sessions with the Chief Executive were held almost weekly throughout 2020/21 and allowed colleagues to celebrate their successes and share with each other what was working well. The sessions during this reporting year have been well received and welcomed by staff.

Key messages and learning from compliments is also shared frequently through existing communication forums.

## 12.2 Examples of Compliments Received

Below are some examples of the 111 compliments received from outside of SCT.

### Children / Young People

Compliments received from Children and Young People are evidencing our passion and commitment to improving their lives. They also demonstrate the effectiveness of our relationship-based practice approach:

*“She has been a big help to me and I’ve been engaging fine, she’s really shown me she will be there... she’s there when I need her and I’ve learnt to be patient and not lose it if she doesn’t get back to me straight away. I realise now it’s not just me she has to look over but anytime I have needed her or for her to be in a meeting with me she’s been there”* **Young Person**

*“I just wanted to say thank you for all your help and assistance, anything I needed help with you was there to support, if you was away for the week you would leave me with a text message with another person’s contact details so I could get help if you wasn’t available, just want to say thank you for all your help and support”* **Young Person**

*“Thank you for writing a letter for me. It shows me that you and X cared. I am so grateful to have my citizenship after all these years. I am so happy...”* **Young Person**

The above compliment is from a child who had made a complaint the previous year regarding the delays in attaining their citizenship. This has now been sorted for the child, who has recently received confirmation of their citizenship. The child wrote a letter to their IRO thanking them for their support.

### Parents

Compliments received from parent’s evidence demonstrate the impact of relationship-based practice on the lives of our children and families.

*“what a wonderful service we have received from X, from what started as an unfortunate phone call (the conference call). X proved to be amazing youth worker who also had the ability to put myself at ease. We obviously faced difficulties due to COVID-19, however X continued to give Y and myself the best service possible, from sending work sheets, working through them, sending relevant information that Y would find interesting (CSCS information) and referring Y to another agency (obviously pending the outcomes of the lockdown).*

*“The service provided by X was very person centred and Y felt valued and listened too, he also had an opportunity to reflect on the upset that he had caused the other party. I appreciate that this was not meant to be a nice opportunity for Y but it turned out to be a positive one which I believe will help him to “do the right thing in the future”* **Parent**

*"I wanted to say a massive thank you to X and the team for getting me and the children to where we are now and keeping my kids safe. I appreciate the work that you do. For example, I didn't know where to start and where I was going until I got in touch with Social Services where I met X who helped me to find a place with my four kids. If it was not for X and the team I would be at a loss. I would have not asked for a better Social Worker for the great job and support given to me and the kids. I appreciate all that you have done. Thank you very much"* **Parent**

## **Foster Carers**

Compliments received from our foster carers reflect the good relationships with have with them, and a joint commitment to improving the lives of our Children and Young People.

*"She was outstanding and listened to the needs of the children and understood that the children are all different and should not be tarred with the same brush. I need you to understand how helping us made all of us feel safe and feel that someone cared..."* **Carer**  
**Foster Carer**

## **Courts**

Compliments from court are held in particularly high regard. They demonstrate our professionalism and evidence our good practice:

*"X was in Court yesterday, for a number of offences. I pointed out to the Magistrates that X has been with us in the Youth Offending Service a fair while and his engagement hasn't been that great previously, but since he's had Y working with him he seems to be accepting the support and making some progress. The Magistrates asked X about their relationship and he said that Y is the only one he feels he can really confide in and that he won't blab to others about what he talks about with him, he listens and doesn't judge him. He also said that Y puts him in his place, tells him where he's going wrong and makes him see how he should be acting instead and he is grateful to him for his support, as is Mum."*

*"I wish to bring to your attention the considerable assistance that X gave to the Court in the case of Y. His section 7 report was concise and cogent. He had clearly built up a rapport with the parents and as a result they both accepted his recommendations without hesitation."*

*Whilst I acknowledge that the parents deserve considerable credit for adopting a child focussed decision, X's involvement assisted both them and the child. As a result, the Court was able to conclude what was a difficult case, by consent, at a remote hearing. X is a credit to your team and I was very grateful for his recommendations and assistance. It is not often that a bust Circuit Judge takes the time to praise a Social Worker. However, in this case X's work was outstanding and so I felt compelled to bring that fact to his manager's attention"*  
**Judge**

## **Partner Agencies**

We have received compliments from a wide range of our partners, including schools, police, health professionals and local authorities. Our compliments are evidencing good

partnership working and how we are working collectively for our Children and Families.

*“I just wanted to send you an email to say what a brilliant job X is doing now under the current circumstances. She is the allocated Social Worker for two families I work with. X has gone above and beyond in her role to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the families. She keeps professionals informed through email or calls and shares information in a timely and appropriate manner. I’m all too aware that Social Workers in Sandwell receive a bad press but wanted to let you know what a fantastic job X is doing now”* **NHS**

*“X commented on how well structured and organised Sandwell are and have been really impressed with the multi-agency work and interventions. X believed and said that it may be worth looking at Sandwell for best practice. This has also filtered down to Y who has been told that Sandwell are the shining light...”* **Police**

*“X is so efficient, effective and fabulously brilliant at her job and at this time when we are all so pressed with time, stress and restrictions, I believe praise should be noted when it has well and truly been earned. X has kept up brilliant communication with us at school, she has continued to be a proactive challenger with the parents involved and has been really approachable and kind with the child involved also. X has always kept us up to date with the case, and sends us minutes, invites to meetings etc. without fail. She is a credit to Sandwell Children’s Trust and I’d like this to be passed as far up the ladder as it needs to go. We all need to know we’re doing a good job”* **School**

*“I’d also like to take this opportunity to say thank you, my advocates have mentioned you by name a number of times recently, all very positive too, and the partnership working, and communication has definitely improved through your input with the service”*  
**Children’s Society**

*“I would like to draw your attention to the very good work that X has been completing with regards to a mutual service user, her attention to detail is commendable; so too is her commitment to assisting Y with understanding the child protection process and what is required of her. This often means she is making more visits than the statutory requirements; it is in response to the complex needs presented by this family. It is a pleasure to work with such an outstanding professional.”* **Children’s Services, Local Authority**

Learning from our compliments is shared across SCT through existing communication channels, including presenting to our Practitioner Improvement Board on frequent basis.

### **13 Service Improvement 2020/21**

The following is a description of improvements made to the compliments and complaints function following the review undertaken in 2020/21.

#### **Improved how we share and recognise where we are getting it right**

- Increased the numbers of compliments sessions held with the Chief Executive
- Improved how we share compliments across SCT, through regular updates



- via our communications channels and reporting to Trust Board
- launched an intranet page dedicated to compliments

### **Continued to embed how we learn from compliments and complaints**

- continued to build on our approach to learning to include learning from compliments and informal feedback
- improved communication channels for sharing the learning from compliments and complaints more widely and regularly
- ensured that learning from compliments and complaints informs the core training offer
- established links with the ASYE and Student Academy
- Contributed to Beyond Auditing Team 'practice conversations' with practitioners to share learning

### **Improved how we engage with Children and Families**

- through sharing the themes of children's complaints and informal feedback with Children and Young People
- improved the avenues for children and families to contact the Complaints Team should they wish to
- improved our internet pages to make it easy and informative for anyone wanting to leave a compliment or make complaint

### **Improved the quality of complaints responses**

- regularly share learning from quality assurance activities to improve quality
- delivering regular compliments and complaints training to managers, IROs and CP Chairs across SCT

### **Children's Complaints and Informal Feedback**

- improved how we complete closing the loop activity and report on findings
- developed a set of themes for children's complaints and informal feedback to accurately capture issues

### **Strengthened Partnership Working**

- we have strengthened our relationship with the Advocacy Service, with the Sandwell Advocacy Forum now being re-established on a quarterly basis

### **Established governance**

- robust reporting mechanisms for all compliments and complaints received is now embedded ensuring EMT receive monthly updates through Information Governance Reports, Trust Board has monthly oversight through the Quality Assurance Report, and learning is also shared with Senior Leaders and Team Managers
- regular learning from compliments and complaints is shared within the Trust Comms
- weekly meetings held with the Director of Operations ensures that any concerns are identified and escalated early on with strategic oversight
- re-established the Voice of the Child Project Board to ensure work is joined up with other areas across SCT

- complaints and compliments learning are also shared with the Voices of Sandwell forum

#### **Improved performance of Stage 2 Complaints**

- worked closely with SMBC Complaints Manager to improve timeliness of Stage 2 complaints
- improved performance reporting for Stage 2 complaints
- improved how we record the finances of Stage 2 complaints

#### **Improved compliance for responding to complaints**

- we have increased the % of complaints responded to within timescales from 71% in 2019/20 to 84% in 2020/21

### **14 Next Steps during 2021/22 and 2022/23**

The following improvements are planned for the next two years across the function:

#### **Improve how we share and recognise where we are getting it right**

- develop our approach to celebrating compliments, including working with existing internal forums to share the learning from compliments

#### **Continue to embed how we learn from compliments and complaints**

- alongside the Quality Assurance Service, evidence how learning from compliments and complaints is directly contributing to practice improvement
- work with the Quality Assurance Service to develop a programme of audits of complaints, from Children and Young People, Parents and Carers and Partners

#### **Improve performance of Stage 2 Complaints**

- continue working with SMBC to improve the timeliness of Stage 2 complaints

#### **Improve compliance for responding to complaints**

- increased the % of complaints responded to within timescales during 2021/22

#### **Improve awareness of compliments and complaints with our Foster Carers**

- ensure Foster Carers are aware of how they, or the children in their care, can make a compliment or complaints

#### **Improve how we Track Actions from Complaints**

- improve our recording and reporting mechanism for tracking the actions from complaints

#### **Rebrand the Complaints Team**

- launch new team name

**Improve Performance Reporting**

- provide performance data at team level to support managers and Heads of Service in managing complaints within their service
- introduce quarterly reporting that includes analysis of the themes, learning and practice improvement

**Explore Mystery Customer Activity**

- explore the use of satisfaction surveys to determine how we are doing, and use the outcomes to inform future service improvement

**Implement Electronic System**

- improve how we record and manage compliments and complaints

**Increase the Number of Informal Feedback Received Through Mind Of My Own and I Say**

- communicate with practitioners to raise awareness about the different methods for capturing informal feedback
- roll out promotional material across SCT with details of how to capture feedback
- contact Young People to promote informal feedback