

NORTHUMBERLAND

Northumberland County Council

Client Relations Service

Annual Report into the work of Northumberland County Council's Client Relations Team with focus upon Quality Assurance.

2012-2013

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Introduction

This report has been produced to inform the public, council members, management and staff of the work undertaken by the Authority's Children's Services Client Relations Team during 2012 – 2013.

The Service

The Client Relations Team forms part of Northumberland County Council's Children's Services Safeguarding Unit and as such exists to provide a quality assurance service and upholds the collective aim and vision of all services for families and children in Northumberland which is to ensure that;

“Every girl and boy in Northumberland, with a special focus on those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged, grow up as healthy, safe, confident citizens who contribute positively to the lives of those around them.”

To help towards achieving this, the two Safeguarding and Looked After Children's Client Relations Officers who make up the Client Relations Team, undertake the following functions:

- Processing of complaints, representations and compliments in relation to services to children.
- Provision of a drop-in service to Looked After Children residing in Northumberland County Council's children's homes.
- Undertaking statutory monthly Regulation 33 visits to Northumberland County Council's Children's Homes and provision of reports into these.
- Oversight and reactive analysis of information generated by consultation with service users and their families.
- Business support to Northumberland Safeguarding Children Board.
- Administration and promotion of independent services provided by Action for Children (Independent Advocates; Independent Persons for formal complaints and secure reviews; Independent Visitors)
- Facilitation of Subject Access Requests from members of the public in relation to personal information held by Children's Social Care.
- Attendance at NSCB Sub Groups.

These functions contribute towards ensuring that service users are able to express their views and that work carried out for and on behalf of vulnerable children and young people in Northumberland is maintained to the best possible standard and meets with statutory requirements. The Team maintain a flexible approach to fulfilling these requirements and is prepared to be adaptable and receptive to change where appropriate.

The Team is ideally situated within the Children's Services Safeguarding Unit to join up with and contribute to the roles of Children's Services professionals both within the Authority and independent of it to promote the welfare of children in Northumberland.

Complaints, Representations and Compliments

Children's Services actively encourage service users to contribute towards service planning and improvement by providing a clearly accessible means by which to express their views on the care being provided. In this way, services can be improving continuously. Listening to the views of service users is recognised by the Authority as an essential contribution to ensuring an excellent service to the county's children, young people and their families. Northumberland County Council's Client Relations Team undertake to receive and coordinate such information, arranging for appropriate response to service users, management and regulating bodies and providing analysis of trends and tracking views and outcomes.

- **Complaints:** Expressions of dissatisfaction or disquiet in relation to the services provided to an individual child or young person, which require a response under the statutory complaints procedures.
- **Representations:** These may not always be complaints - they might also be enquiries or comments about the availability, delivery or nature of a service which are not criticisms. Requests for support or changes and adjustments to a service would be dealt with as a representation and termed as a 'miscellaneous enquiry' and dealt with accordingly and separately from the complaints process. Similar consideration will be given to positive remarks or ideas that require a response from the Authority.
- **Compliments:** Expressions of praise or satisfaction of the work of an individual or a team.

Complaints

Legislation

The arrangements for the statutory management of complaints from children and young people (and their representatives) are set out in the Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006. This legislation requires that everyone who provides Social Services must have procedures in place to respond to complaints made about those services.

Children's Services Social Care Complaints Process

- **Who can complain**

The statutory complaint procedure can be accessed by all children and young people who receive or are entitled to a service and also those connected to them who have appropriate interest in a child or young person's welfare.

- **The Process**

Stage 1 – Local Resolution

The aim of this stage is to satisfactorily resolve the complaint if at all possible and this can be regarded as the most important stage. At this point, the complaint is dealt with by local managers who are in a position of knowing the most about the issues of the complaint. A team manager or operational manager will be required to work on resolving the complaint and implementing any action required to do this.

Legislation requires a complaint at stage 1 be resolved within 10 working days, this can be extended to 20 working days with the knowledge of the complainant. A further extension is possible if necessary however the complainant must be appraised of the reason for the delay and given the option to move the complaint to stage 2 if desired.

Stage 2 – Formal Investigation

If a complaint cannot be resolved through local resolution, then a formal investigation can be arranged at the complainant's request. An independent Investigating Officer will be appointed, together with a statutorily required Independent Person who will monitor the investigation to ensure that it is conducted fairly and objectively and will report back directly to Children's Services in line with this. The Investigating Officer's report will be sent to the Adjudicating Officer within Children's Services to respond to any recommendations and the final response to the complainant will come from the Corporate Director of Children's Services.

Legislation requires that a complaint at stage 2 should be resolved within 25 working days and there is provision to extend this to 65 working days if necessary.

Stage 3 – Review Panel

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the findings or recommendations of the Investigating Officer's report and the Directorate's response to the report, they have recourse to request that the matter be referred to a Complaint Review Panel. This request must be received within 20 working days. The panel is administered independently of Children's Services and comprises of three persons – a Chair and two panel members, all of whom will be independent of the Authority.

- **Local Government Ombudsman**

A complainant may approach the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) at any stage, although the LGO would not normally become involved in a complaint before it has exhausted the statutory complaints process. Following a Complaint Review Panel, a complainant will be advised of their right to contact the LGO.

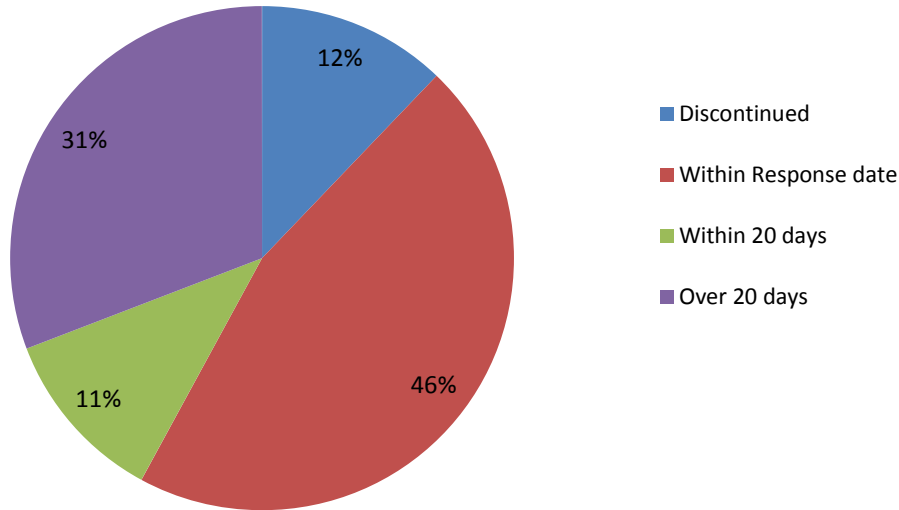
Complaint Monitoring

A complaints management database is held by the Client Relations team as a working document. This provides an audit trail and is used to assist for the purpose of monitoring and reporting on all aspects of complaints including trends. It also tracks the implementation of any resulting recommendations for practice improvement.

- **Timescales Achieved**

Complaints at Stage 1: During 2012 – 2013, a total of **106** complaints were responded to at this stage of the complaints procedure and the figure below represents the timescales of response. It should be noted that whilst it is taking longer to resolve a significant number of complaints to the satisfaction of the complainant, few of the complaints have progressed to stage 2 and with this in mind it is felt that the extra time taken has been justified.

Complaint timescales at Stage 1: 2012-13



Complaints at Stage 2: During 2012 – 2013 a total of **four** complaints were processed at this stage of the complaints procedure. **Three** of these are still ongoing and **one** was discontinued as the young person involved declined to consent to the investigation of the issues raised by a parent.

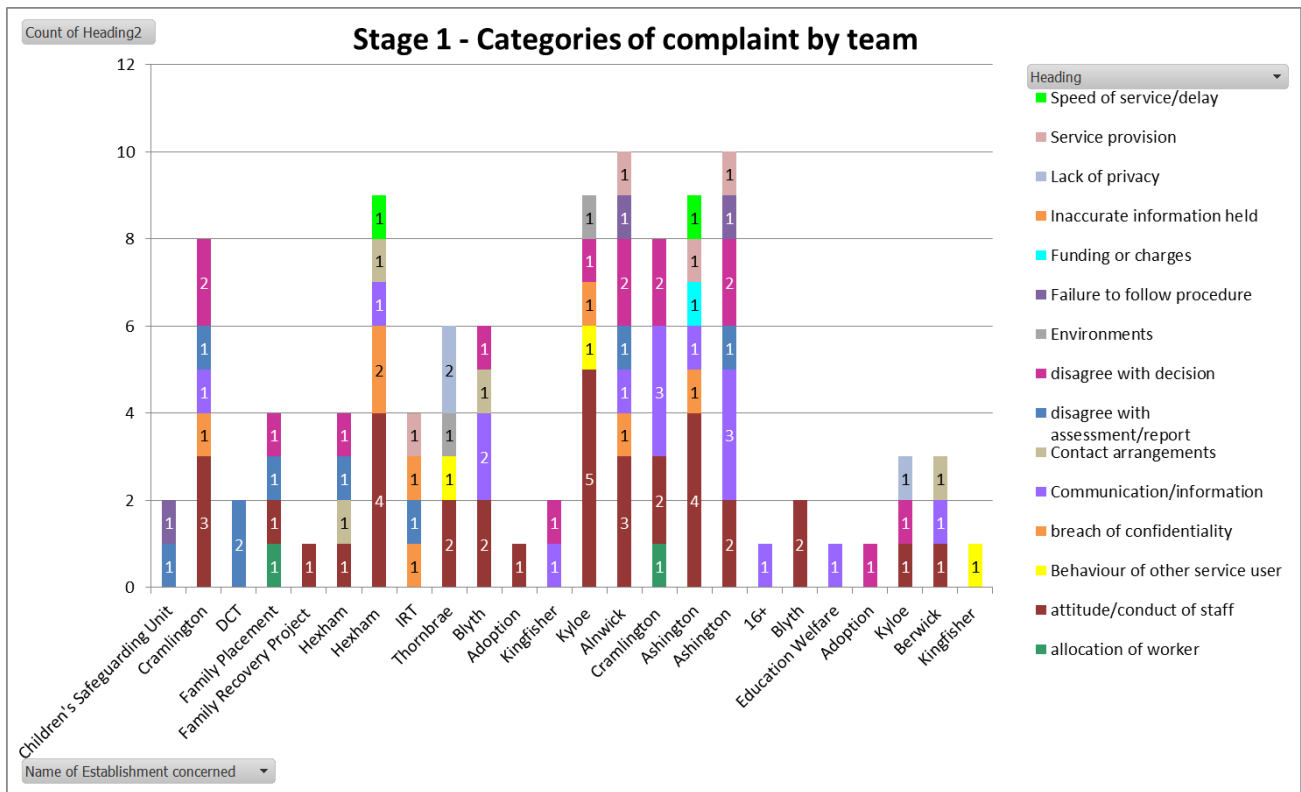
During the time of this reporting period **three** complaints from 2011-12 were finalised.

Complaints at Stage 3: During 2012-13 **two** of the complaints investigated in 2011-12 were submitted to an Independent Complaints Panel. This process was completed within the statutory deadline for both complaints.

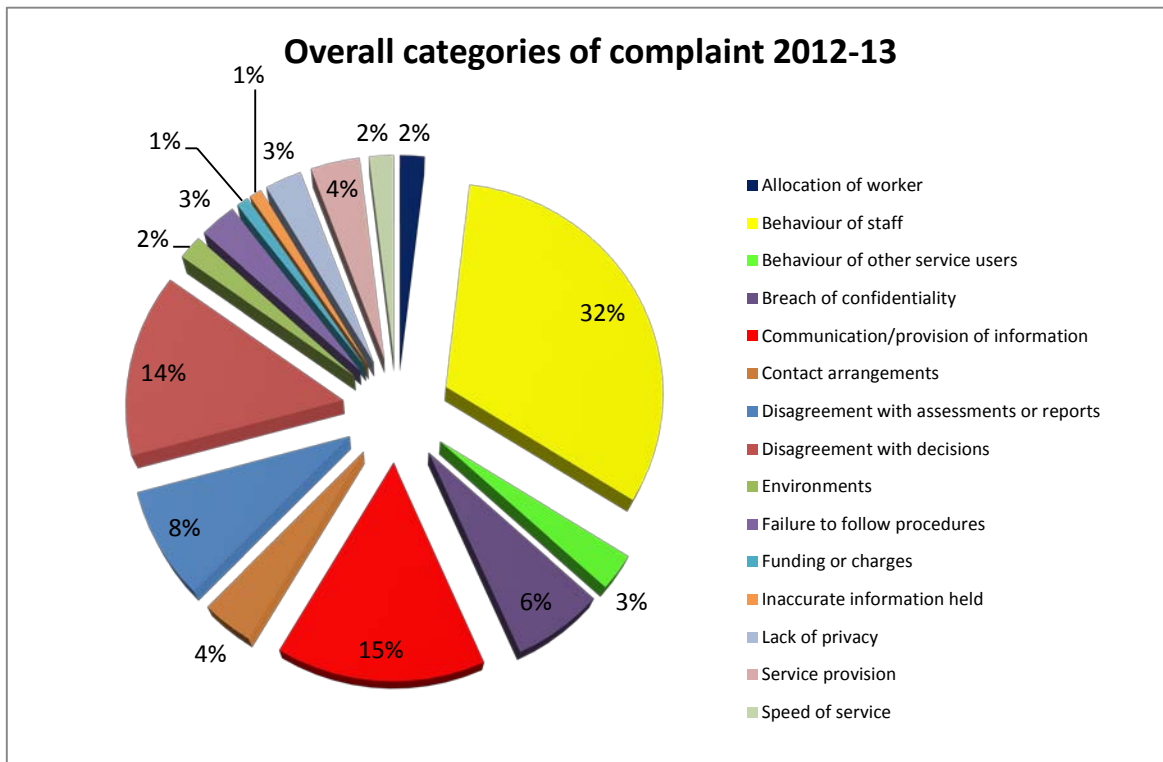
Complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman: During 2012-2013 **five** were considered by the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). Of these complaints, the LGO agreed to investigate **three**. **Two** of these were in respect of social care and **one** related to Special Educational Needs. The Authority is still awaiting outcomes to these complaints. The LGO were unable to investigate the remaining two because the issues were not in their remit.

- **Categories of Complaint**

Complaints at Stage 1: Complaints received can contain more than one issue, however only the primary concerns have been identified for the purpose of this report. The figure below illustrates a breakdown of complaints by area and team.



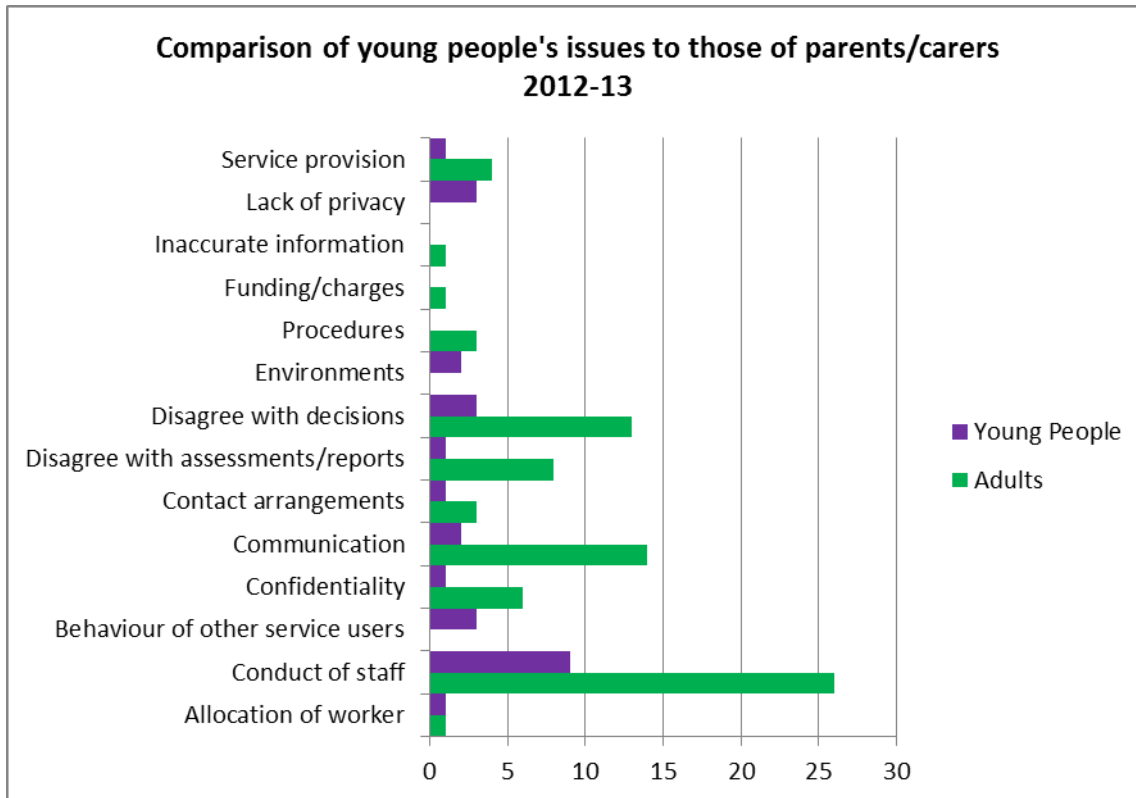
The figure below represents an overall illustration of the issues raised by complainants:



In 2012-2013, complaints considered at stage 1 of the Children’s Social Care Complaint Process have been primarily linked to complainant’s perception of the behaviours and attitudes of staff and other service users. Many of the complainants who raised these issues also raised concerns about communication, provision of information and disagreement with decision making/case planning. These categories were also prevalent during the previous reporting period. Resolution was most often brought about through promotion of dialogue between complainants and the organisation providing opportunities for better understanding on both sides.

25% of stage 1 complaints were brought by children and young people, all of who were looked after by the Authority. 75% of stage 1 complaints were brought by parents or carers on behalf of children and young people 17.5% of which related to children who were looked after by the Authority.

There were significant variances in the issues generally complained about by adults in comparison to those of young people.



Young people were more concerned about issues such as the behaviour of other service users, environments, and privacy problems and how these were impacting upon them, and this would be in line with expectations given that a greater number of young people making complaints reside in local authority children’s homes and foster care. Communication issues were significant within complaints raised by adults but young people expressed very little concern in relation to this and this was also the case in respect of allocation of workers. This together with the fact that young people in Northumberland are readily using the complaints process suggests that young people are receiving good levels of input from professionals and that strong links exist between young people and their care teams. However a common complaint theme for both adults and young people was their perception of the attitude or behaviour of Children’s Services staff. The process of resolution has highlighted that often explanations and reassurances are effective in promoting a greater understanding for the complainant about the work being undertaken by Children’s Services staff. Where complaints have identified a need for practice improvement the outcomes of these have been instrumental in bringing about the necessary changes in the way the Authority works with families.

Of the **four** complaints received at stage 2 in 2012 - 2013, the areas of practice complained about were:

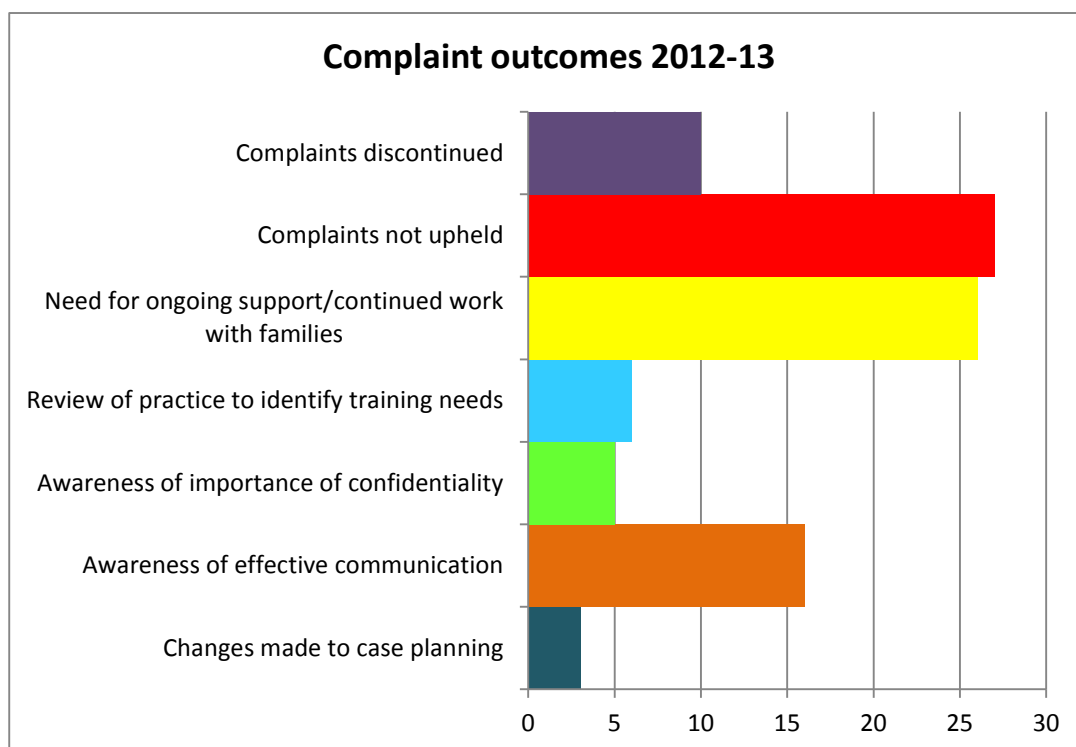
- Attitude/conduct of staff
- Breach of confidentiality
- Speed of service/delays

- Disagreements with assessments/reports
- Finance and charges

Implementation of Organisational Learning from Complaints

Although complaints are centred around the individual and may not always be a reflection of practice across the organisation, any recommendations for practice improvement resulting from complaints is applied to the service as a whole where appropriate, and this ensures the continual improvement of quality of practice.

The key outcomes and learning points of complaints arising in 2012-13 have been highlighted below:



Recommendations from complaints investigated during the period of this report have enabled areas of practice improvement to be made and implemented and these include:

Accuracy of information in case recording and within assessments and reports:

- Improvements to managerial oversight of assessments and reports via effective supervision, reminders rolled out to supervisory staff and Team Managers. The emphasis was on objectivity, context and verification of information.
- Review of quality of written and computerised case recording – regular cross team file reviews are in force however reminders to staff across the service were issued re effective case recording. Also to be monitored via supervision.

Failure to follow procedure:

- Review of individual cases to identify whether and where further action was required with a proviso that remedial action be taken should this evidence that failure to follow procedure had impacted upon eventual outcomes for service users.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedures and guidance for managers and staff have been drafted and formalised in relation to maintaining confidentiality of clients known personally to staff members. • Following a complainant not being provided with opportunity to represent his views within conference, the complainant was provided with opportunity to place views on file. Lessons learned from this were disseminated to appropriate services and attention drawn to existing procedures.
<p>Communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reminders rolled out to team managers and staff to involve/inform absent parents on receipt of referrals and in contribution to assessments (where appropriate). • Reminders rolled out to team managers and staff to ensure that parents are given opportunities to respond to assessments prior to final analysis and/or closure of cases. • Reminders to staff to ensure that documentation and information is saved appropriately for future reference prior to deletion of emails.
<p>Confidentiality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedures and guidance for managers and staff have been drafted and formalised in relation to maintaining confidentiality of clients known personally to staff members.
<p>Attitude/conduct of staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reporting of issues to HCPC in relation to the quality of work of an individual former agency social worker to prevent reoccurrence of similar situations in their work with other families. • Concerns have been reported and held on file in relation to a former staff member for awareness within the Authority in the event that they pursue work with the Authority at a future date. • A Grievance Policy has been drawn up for the use of Foster Carers in Northumberland.

Corporate Complaints

Complaints not covered by the Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006, are dealt with under Northumberland County Council's corporate complaints procedure. Complaints made by parents or carers or other adults about the impact of a service on them personally are generally considered under the corporate complaints procedure, as are other services to children other than social care and schools. Although these are logged centrally, Client Relations coordinate these complaints at Stage 1 of this procedure, liaise with the complainants and ensure they are investigated and responded to by the appropriate managers.

During 2012-13 Client Relations became involved in a total of 5 corporate complaints for services to children and the three main areas were, learners with learning difficulties/disabilities (in respect of the actions of the associated panel); special educational needs and free school meals.

Compliments Logged

Client Relations rely upon Team Managers to ensure that positive comments made about Children's Services staff are passed on for logging. The figures reported for 2012-13 indicate a decrease on last year and work continues to be carried out to raise awareness within teams of

reporting appreciation of the service. **69** compliments were recorded for this reporting period in contrast to **114** reported last year.

Supporting Young People to Raise Issues

It is an expectation that young people looked after by the Authority are able to access support from within the organisation and also from independent agencies, to enable them to express their views about the service they are receiving. It is very important that young people are able to contribute to planning in relation to their care and as such, Client Relations undertakes to ensure that support is available for young people to bring forward their issues.

- **Client Relations Links and Communication with Looked After Children**

Quality Assurance Officers from Client Relations are a familiar sight to Young people living in Northumberland County Council's children's homes. The team have been successfully conducting regular drop-in sessions with young people over the past year and also meet with them regularly during the monthly Regulation 33 visits and attendance at young people's meeting in Kyloe House. This ensures that young people are able to raise issues to staff outside of the environment they are living in. It has also allowed Client Relations to build up positive links with these groups of young people who as a result, are aware of and actively use the support offered to advise the Authority of any issues they have with the service and to seek to have these resolved. To facilitate this, Client Relations will raise awareness of young people's comments and concerns with relevant managers.

The Quality Assurance Officers who make up the Client Relations Team have both received 'key training' and are therefore able to access Northumberland County Council's Secure Unit Kyloe House, independently of residential care staff in response to complaints, for random drop-in visits and for unannounced Regulation 33 visits. This helps to ensure that the young people in Kyloe have many opportunities to make their issues known and to have them responded to.

Client Relations will always personally visit young people who are looked after, in response to complaints received from them.

Some of the Authority's young people have placements with independent care providers in the region, and Client Relations will also attend these establishments to meet with young people there and provide opportunities for them to talk about any concerns they may have.

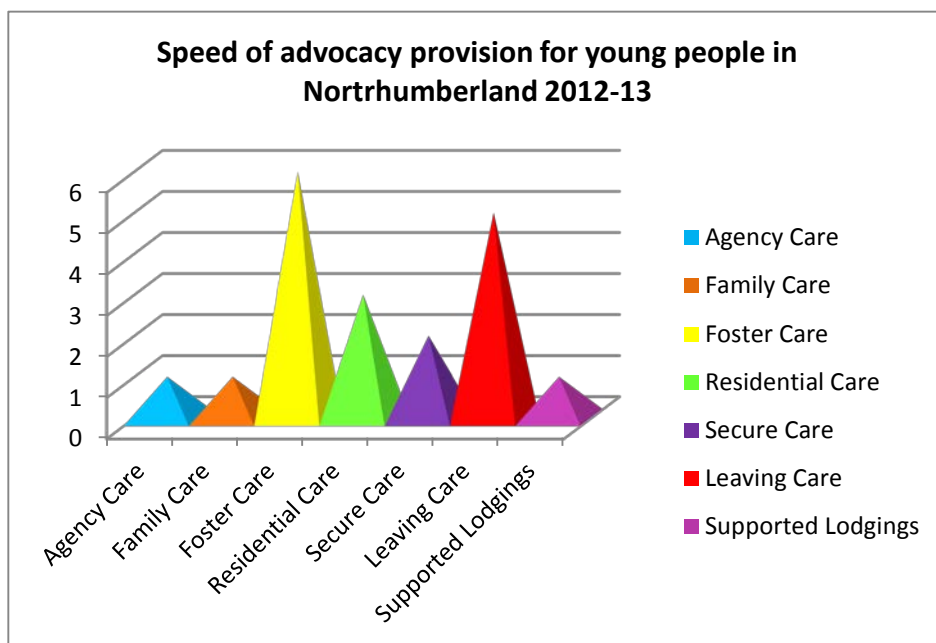
The Client Relations Team is also working to raise awareness of their role and their accessibility to children and young people in foster care. Analysis confirmed that the number of complaints received from this particular group of young people was comparably low. Links have since been developed with the new management team within Northumberland County Council's Fostering Service to help support this. Client Relations Officers have attended foster carer's forums to provide advice and information about the service.

- **Advocacy Services for Looked after Children**

Looked after children who choose to make a complaint about services they have received are entitled to access the support of an Advocate. The Advocacy Service for looked after children in Northumberland sits within the Engagement and Development Team. Young people can choose to receive support from one of the two Participation and Advocacy Officers at any point during their care, regardless of whether they are making a complaint. The service is there to support them to

have their views heard if they feel they are not being listened to, or feel unable to put across their views themselves. Under certain circumstances, such as a young person requiring legal advice or should a child or young person not want to use an in-house advocate, an advocacy referral will be passed on to Action for Children, who provide an independent service. The Participation and Advocacy Officers also discuss the possibility of an Independent Advocate with any child or young person they meet with through an advocacy referral.

During 2012/13, the in-house Advocacy Service was accessed by **19** children and young people, **5** of which were passed on to independent advocacy services and **one** which transpired to be in need of an independent visitor rather than an advocate.



The Client Relations Team work closely with the Engagement and Development Team to ensure that looked after children receive the support they need. All looked after children and young people are informed about their right to an advocate when they make a complaint and information about Advocacy is circulated widely to all looked after children and their carers. Client Relations are members of the Advocacy Steering Group which is chaired by the Engagement and Development Manager. Other members include representatives from Action for Children and the Children’s Services Contracts Officer.

Monitoring for quality assurance purposes

- **Consultation with Parents and Carers**

Parents are consulted by Client Relations in terms of whether they feel that the Authority is getting it right in providing a service which will promote the wellbeing of their children and improve their future potential. Consultation takes several forms:

Complaints: The Client Relations Service is accessible to the families of children involved with Social Care. Parents and carers can contact CRS by completing and submitting freepost forms from information leaflets on display in Children’s Services establishments throughout the county; by using the Northumberland County Council Website which has information and online forms; via

phone; by text or by email. The information leaflets and webpages also provide contact numbers and email addresses.

Surveys:

- Children's Services Social Care Surveys are issued on a quarterly basis to parents and carers whose children have been subject to an initial assessment by Children's Services within the previous six months. These relate to the area of service they have received. Client Relations have oversight of all responses received and will collate and log comments. This helps to identify trends for quality assurance purposes, and very importantly allows opportunities for any issues expressed including safeguarding concerns, to be responded to.
- Client Relations also conduct their own satisfaction surveys into the way complaints have been handled.
- The Engagement and Development Team issues surveys to parents of children and young people in the Authority's Children's Homes and also to parents whose children's involvement with the 16+ service is coming to an end.

Regulation 33 reports: Client Relations contact parents, carers or family members of children resident in the Authority's children's homes to obtain their views about the standard of care to their child within their accommodation. These views are fed back to Ofsted and relevant Children's Services staff and managers, and are also monitored for emerging safeguarding issues or trends which can then be responded to.

• **Links and Communication with Staff in relation to the Welfare of Looked After Children**

The Client Relations Service aims to maintain its profile with all staff involved in care and planning for young people. As such the Team takes opportunities to meet with and speak to staff on all levels, about how they can best support young people's access to the service and also their role in the resolution of complaints or issues.

The links established with Children's Services Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) have been mutually beneficial in terms of provision of insight into issues raised by young people and their carers. IROs meet with looked after children on a regular basis and will reinforce knowledge about complaints or advocacy services to young people and can also help to take forward individual issues through their links with young people and their multi-agency care teams.

Client Relations also maintain a working relationship with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), whose role is to advise and coordinate processes where allegations against professionals occur as sometimes such issues can be identified from complaints.

Client Relations staff attend some of the NSCB sub-groups and are able to contribute to these and also to liaise with professionals from other agencies with regard to related issues.

Progression of Subject Access Requests under the Data Protection Act:

Client Relations are responsible for coordinating the progress of Subject Access Requests in accordance with the Data Protection Act. Staff liaise with the Information Governance Team, where requests are logged and will arrange to have relevant information prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Act. There is a requirement to handle Subject Access Requests in

relation to Children's Social Care issues with sensitivity and due regard for the effect the sharing of this information can have upon the individuals involved. The Client Relations Service works to ensure that these are handled and processed accordingly by experienced staff.

Provision of Business Support to Northumberland Children's Safeguarding Board:

Client Relations Service also provide business support to the NSCB, this is varied role which continues to develop to assist with the NSCB's needs and changing priorities. Both of the Safeguarding and LAC Quality Assurance Officers are involved in sub-committees of the NSCB. The link to the NSCB have provided the team with a readily accessible source of information in terms multi-agency practice, procedures and guidance and learning outcomes of case reviews, management reviews and serious case reviews (locally, regionally and nationally).

Considerations for 2013-14:

1. Work to be undertaken with service managers to ensure that all complaints resolved at source by their teams are forwarded to Client Relations in order to obtain a comprehensive view of areas for potential service improvement. Similarly, service managers will be encouraged to report where compliments are received.
2. Client Relations will be looking at ways in which to improve the timeliness of the resolution of complaints handling. This will involve liaising with managers responsible for looking into issues and in streamlining in-house processes where appropriate.
3. The Client Relations Service will continue to look at more ways to ensure that all children and young people are aware of the service and how to reach members of the team should they need to raise issues outside of their own carers and care teams.
4. Client Relations will be working to raise their profile with the independent children's homes in Northumberland, in terms of ensuring that the residents are able to reach members of the team and also with a view to being part of the quality assurance process for these establishments.
5. The team will be looking to acquire additional resources/expertise to support the increase in Subject Access applications.
6. To continue to develop the service to meet the ongoing needs of the organisation.
7. To continue to disseminate lessons learned from all of the quality assurance processes the service is linked with, including case reviews, management reviews and serious case reviews.
8. Continuing to strengthen links between young people, their care teams and IROs.