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Corporate Parenting Board

Date: Thursday, 26 November 2026
Time: 3.00 pm
Venue: Council Chamber, County Hall, Dorchester, DT1 1XJ

Members (Quorum: 3)
Duncan Sowry-House (Vice-Chair), Stella Jones, Julie Robinson, Cathy Lugg, Jindy Atwal and Carole Jones

Chief Executive: Catherine Howe, County Hall, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 1XJ

For more information about this agenda please contact Democratic & Governance Services Meeting Contact Tel: 01305 224450 - antony.nash@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

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Agenda

Item		Pages
11.	**COMPLAINTS ANNUAL REPORT DISCUSSION**	3 - 24
	The Corporate Director - Care & Protection to discuss the complaints relevant to Corporate parenting board from the wider complaints report.	

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People and Health Scrutiny Committee

30 November 2026

Title of report Complaints Annual report 2025-26

For Recommendation to Council

Cabinet Member:
Cllr B Wilson, Transformation, Customer & Workforce

Local Councillor(s):

Senior Leadership Team:
J Mair - Director, Assurance and Governance

Report author and job title: Antony Bygrave -Complaints Manager
Email: antony.bygrave@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Statutory Authority: Local Government Ombudsman

Report status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

1. Executive summary (maximum of 500 words)

1.1 This annual report provides an update on the numbers, types and outcomes of complaints made against services at Dorset Council. There are also appendices that meets statutory reporting requirements of Children's and Adult's social care.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1 That the Committee scrutinises and notes the Annual Complaints Report for 2025/26

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

3.1 To have an awareness of the numbers and types of complaints and the organisational learning.

4.The Report

4.1 The Corporate Complaints Team sit in Legal & Democratic as an Assurance function, with the emphasis more on learning from complaints, rather than merely processing increasing numbers. As the report will show the greater level of scrutiny on services remains year on year with an increase in most directorates

The council operates 4 complaints procedures. The Council's own – which is a one stage process with a review process as necessary and Children's Services and Adult Services Social Care have their own legal procedures. Full details of these procedures are found in Appendix 1 and 2 as full reports which are required to satisfy legislation. We have also been delegated the Councillor Code of Conduct complaints to triage and manage. Although not contributing greatly to the overall numbers, it has been an interesting experience trying to apply the same culture of learning to a new and unfamiliar policy to the team.

4.2 The team's focus for this coming year is:

Recognising and following the best practices of the Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code, and pre-empting the likely outcomes should they need to be involved

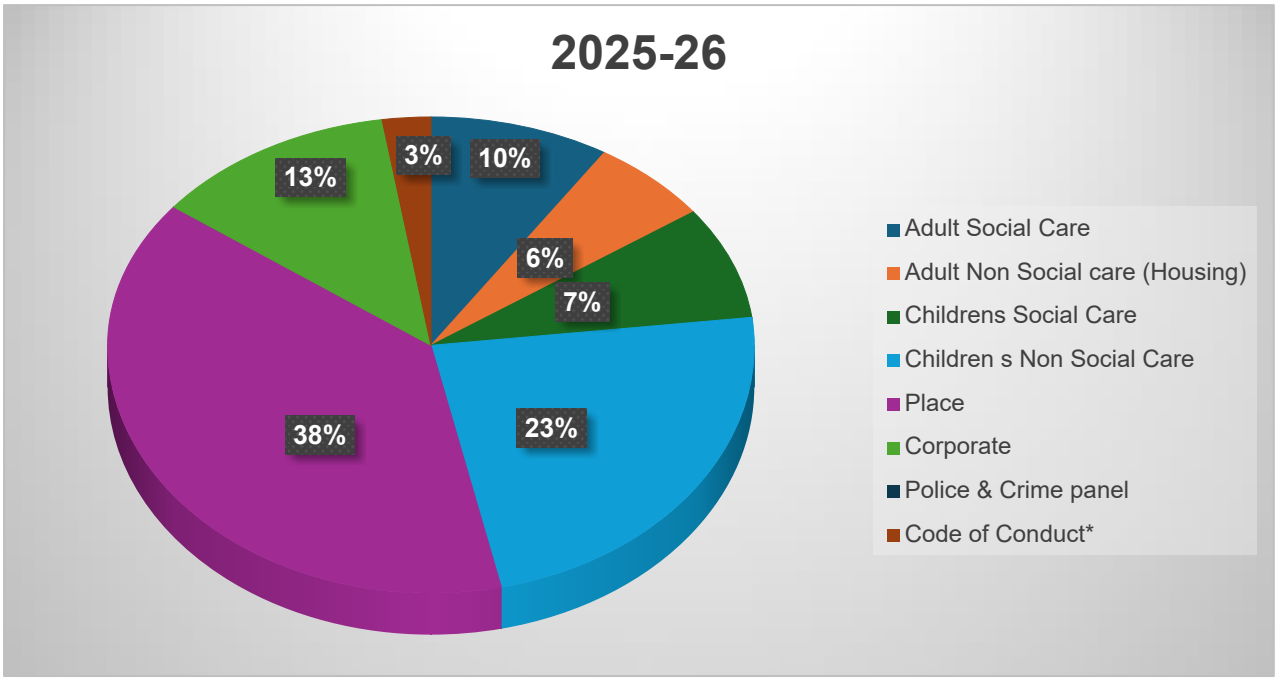
Reporting/Learning – 2025-26 saw an improvement in the quality of learnings presented by team managers. There is a genuine mutual awareness for delivering extra value.

4.3 **2025-26 Numbers**
Total Complaint Contacts –2406

This is a 25% increase from the 1919 received in 2024-25. This follows a 17% rise the previous year. We are encouraged that the Complaints function is still easy to find and must remember that the Complaints function is a learning mechanism for Dorset Council as well as an early warning system. This report highlights the areas of possible concern as well as the valuable organisational learning. We do also however note the mixed blessing of AI in complaints that has escalated the vexatious nature and create adversarial positions from the start, where historically complaints were genuine requests for improvement, the process now feels weaponised through AI use.

The Ombudsman's Complaints Code give best practice advice and what we receive more often than not are genuine service failure complaints, having stripped out any duplication or service requests, so it is however worth noting that genuine formal complaints to Dorset Council have increased 221% since the first year as a unitary council

Dorset Council Complaints Overview

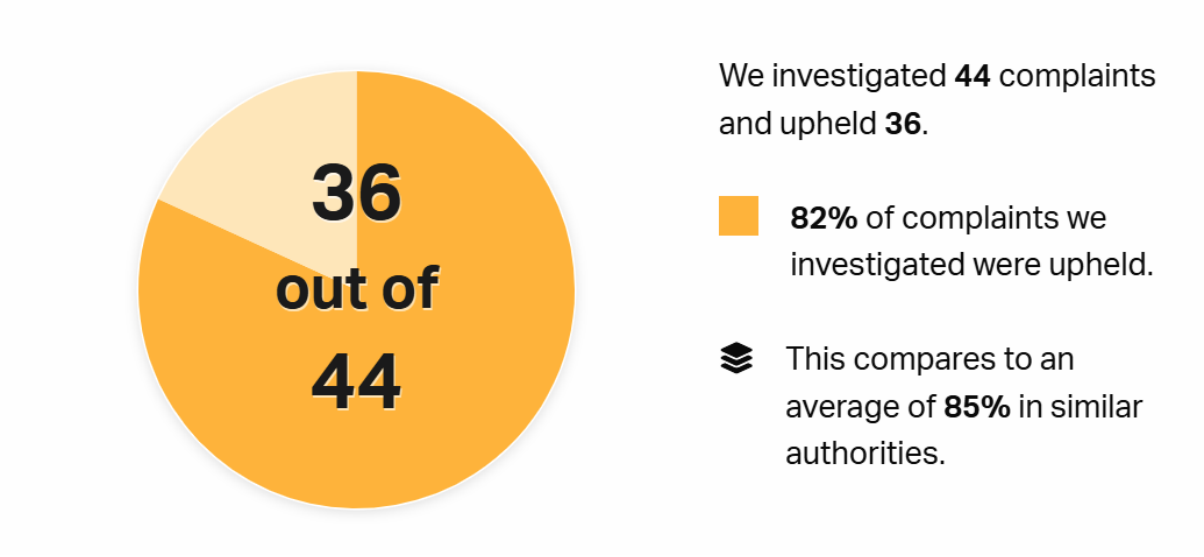


Directorate	2025-26	2024-25	%
Adult Social Care	**231**	201	**+15%**
Adult Non Social care (Housing)	**146**	133	**+10%**
Childrens Social Care	**181**	197	**-8%**
Children s Non Social Care	**561**	321	**+75%**
Place	**920**	744	**+25%**
Corporate	**304**	239	**+27%**
Police & Crime panel	**0**	2	**0**
Code of Conduct*	***63***	82	**-23%**
TOTALS	**2406**	1919	**+25%**

Formal Complaints 1407
Out of the 2406 contacts, 1407 of these were managed and responded to as formal complaints. The focus on early resolution that used to pay dividends for all concern has now seen a shift (due to AI) for strict process demand

Informal Complaints 999
Of the 2406 complaints received, 999 were considered as cases where resolution could be met without the undue process of the formal complaints route, or where other processes were more appropriate.
The Ombudsman's Handling Code has limited informal resolution and we have experienced the rise in complaint volumes as predicted in last years report, as there is no 'Informal/Stage 0' option. We welcome the clarify and will still apply common sense, but through the complaints process

4.4 **Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman Complaints**



The Ombudsman report that 82% of complaints they investigated were upheld. This is slightly less that last year and less than other authorities in the local area who average 85%.

However, this only tells a small part of the story.

The Complaints Team received and managed 2406 complaints in 2025-26 which is the highest number since Dorset Council was formed. Councillors and Members should be heartened that of these complaints only 4% reached the Ombudsman at all. This demonstrates that the majority of the time Dorset Council get it right first time, and have a positive culture around complaints, learnings and actions
Only 1.5% of all DC complaints 25-26 were upheld by the LGSCO

A point of note that could get missed is that the Ombudsman (again) haven't had cause to write any reports against Dorset Council in 2025-26, which is impressive. In fact, they have only done that once in the history of Dorset Council

Comparing 2024–25 with 2025–26 to date, the overall pattern of Ombudsman findings is consistent. Children's SEN remains the primary hotspot, with Adult Social Care a steady secondary pressure. What has changed in 2025–26 is the volume and breadth of Ombudsman decisions, with upheld findings spread across more service areas rather than concentrated in one. This reflects increased complaint demand and stricter application of the Ombudsman's Handling Code rather than a decline in complaint handling performance.

	Upheld 2025-26	Upheld 2024-25
Childrens Social Care	**4**	1
Childrens Non SC	**23 (17 SEND - 5 Alt Provision)**	15
Adult Social Care	**5**	8
Adults Non (housing)	**0**	2
Corporate	**1 C.Tax)**	2(C Tax)
Place	**3 (1, ASB, 1 Planning, 1 Enforcement delay)**	5 (2 planning, 2 SEN trans, 1 EH)
CofC	**0**	0
TOTAL	**36**	33

Dorset Council met the recommendations in 100% of these cases.

4.5 **Totals by category**

Category	**Total £**	**Number of payments**
Education & Children's Services	**£34,290**	**25**
Adult Care Services	**£7,333**	**7**
Environmental / Public Protection	£750	1
Benefits & Tax	£250	1

Dorset Council financial remedies in 2025-26 resulting in a total cost of £42,623.00 which is a 3K increase on last year

In addition to this, we have worked hard to pre-empt Ombudsman outcomes as part of the complaint handling process and have also paid £34,794.12 for SEND related complaints, outside of any involvement from the Ombudsman. So we know complaints have cost Dorset Council £77,417.12 2025-26, excluding officer time

4.6 **Timescales – 25% Overdue**

The complaints procedures operated by the Council vary in timescales for responses. The Whole Authority procedure is 20 working days, the Children's Services Social Care procedure is 10 working days, up to 20 by exception (with automatic escalation to an independent investigation if not met. This can be costly). The Adult Social Care procedure does not specify exact timescales, and we are now looking to establish these on a case by case basis depending on the gravity and risk of the complaint and the time needed to investigate it

Non-Social Care complaints are currently reporting at approximately 25% overdue; however, this requires important context. Within this figure (and with the increasing presence of AI) there is significant challenge on decisions, and requests for additional responses following the initial reply. This can extend the duration that a complaint remains open within the system, even where the initial response was issued within the required 20-day timescale. As a result, recorded closure times can give the impression of delay, when in practice the Council has responded on time at the first instance and has then continued engagement to address ongoing queries. There have also been some resource pressures in the Complaints function due the the 25% increase, meaning some delays in assigning cases

Recognising this, the Council has strengthened its approach to clearly position Non-Social Care complaints as a single-stage process, in line with corporate policy. Where complainants remain dissatisfied following the formal response, they are now consistently and clearly signposted to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, rather than cases being held open while further informal challenges are addressed. This will ensure greater clarity for customers, and more accurate performance reporting, and alignment with best practice.

Adult Social Care	42%
Adult Non Social Care (Housing)	20%
Childrens Social Care	18%
Childrens Non Social Care	25%
Place	25%
Corporate Development	30%

4.7 **Justifications – 10% fully 12% partially**
This shows a small decrease on the 11% upheld the as the previous year. It may still seem surprising that so few complaints are considered to be justified by responding managers, but the real challenge is to ensure the justified complaints contribute to the lessons learned and continual improvement

4.8 **Compliments – 523**
Alongside the complaints presented within this report, it is encouraging to note that 523 compliments were received during 2025/26. Although slightly less than the

previous year, we note it takes effort to complement a job well done and are grateful to those that took the time to offer a more balanced critique of our services.

This included 205 compliments within Place, 113 within Adult Social Care, 92 within Corporate Services, 61 within Children's Wellbeing and Assessment, 38 within Children's Social Care, and 14 within Adult Wellbeing and Assessment. The significant number of residents taking the time to acknowledge good service demonstrates the commitment of colleagues across the Council and serves as an important reminder that the vast majority of interactions with our services are positive and valued by those we support. These compliments provide a welcome balance to complaint reporting and highlight the positive difference staff continue to make to the lives of Dorset residents every day.

4.9 **Learnings – 262**
We are pleased to report 262. This is a 10% decrease in cases which generated valuable learnings and actions, but still an impressive effort, the second highest since Dorset Council started. Especially as the learnings are now so measurable and present genuine action plans that close loops in the service areas. Councillors and members should be assured of the positive culture around complaints at Dorset Council, and our commitment to providing genuine value from peoples concerns

Adults Social Care (ASC)
Across 45 complaints, the learning is clear and consistent:

- Communication and delays dominate, particularly around safeguarding, assessments, and family engagement.
- Process gaps (missed steps, unclear pathways) and financial clarity issues also feature strongly.
- There is a recurring theme of people not feeling listened to or involved, alongside workforce pressures impacting responsiveness.
  Overall, complaints are largely driven by timeliness, clarity, and consistency of practice, rather than isolated errors.

Adults Non-Social Care (Housing / A-NSC)
Across **20 complaints**, key themes mirror ASC but within housing delivery:

- Communication failures and delays in action are the most common drivers of dissatisfaction.
- Process inefficiencies, administrative errors, and poor case handling (including missed steps and premature closures) are significant contributors.
- Customer experience is impacted by inconsistent decision-making and lack of proactive support.

Overall, complaints highlight system and process weaknesses, with communication and timeliness at the core.

Children's Social Care (CSC)
Across **25 complaints**, the learning is clear and consistent:

Communication failures are the dominant theme — including tone, lack of updates, unclear decisions, and families/young people not feeling heard.

Process gaps are evident (e.g. case closures without explanation, poor meeting arrangements, missing documentation).

There is a strong emphasis on **child and family voice**, with repeated learning around ensuring children, carers and parents are actively involved and informed.

Overall, complaints highlight relationship-based practice issues, where communication, clarity, and involvement directly impact trust and outcomes.

Children's Non-Social Care (SEND / Education / Family Help)
Across 100 complaints, there is a high volume of systemic learning:

- Communication and delays overwhelmingly dominate, particularly around EHCP processes, updates, and responsiveness.
- Process and statutory compliance failures are significant (missed timescales, delays in provision, case oversight).
- Ongoing challenges linked to capacity, staff absence, and demand pressures are clearly impacting service delivery.

Cross-cutting message:
Both CSC and non-SC show the same underlying pattern — communication, delays, and system/process issues — but in Children's services this is amplified by statutory duties and impact on children's outcomes, requiring sustained focus on timeliness, clarity, and capacity.

Corporate
Across **12 complaints**, themes are focused and transactional:

- Delays and communication gaps dominate (e.g. council tax, SARs, complaints handling).

- Issues often arise from backlogs, high demand, and staffing pressures, particularly in Revenues and Benefits.
- There are also process and governance gaps (e.g. incorrect billing, recruitment authorisation, data handling).

Place (incl. Planning, Highways, Waste, Parking, Transport)
Across 60 complaints, themes are broader and frontline-facing:

- Communication and responsiveness are the most consistent issues (missed updates, unclear information, tone).
- Delays and service delivery failures feature strongly (appointments, maintenance, transport, enforcement).
- Evidence of process inconsistency and practical service impacts (e.g. signage, collections, inspections, accessibility).
- Some recurring themes around customer experience and staff interaction (perceived tone, empathy, clarity).

5. Alternative options considered

5.1 NA

6. Legal considerations

6.1 NA

7. Financial implications

7.1 As in previous years, SEND related complaints still dominate the Ombudsman's involvement. This again is largely due to children out of education in Dorset and a lack of available, suitable placements. This is a national issue, but we have taken steps to improve communication and be more available before matters escalate to complaints.

Totals by category – LGSCO Payments

Category	Total £	Number of payments
Education & Children's Services	**£34,290**	**25**
Adult Care Services	**£7,333**	**7**
Environmental / Public Protection	£750	1
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8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

8.1 None

9. Well-being and health implications

9.1 The consistently high volume of complaints, coupled with associated vexatious behaviour continues to have an impact on the wellbeing for colleagues involved with complaint handling and response. The team and associated colleagues are regularly encouraged, through line management and other Dorset Council support, to be mindful of themselves and their colleagues in-keeping with our behaviours

10. Other Implications

10.1 none

11. Risk Implications

11.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: LOW

Residual Risk:LOW

12. Equlities

12.1 None

13. Appendicies

13.1 Childrens Services reporting requirements

13.2 Adult Services reporting requirements

14. Background Papers

14.1 None

15. Report sign-off

15.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Assurance & Governance (Monitoring

Officer), the Director for Resources (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Cabinet Member(s)

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Dorset Council 2024-25

Executive Summary – Children's Social Care Complaints

Reporting period: 2025–2026

Children's Service Statutory Reporting Requirements

There has been an overall 25% increase in all Complaints across Dorset Council, but a decrease in Childrens Services complaints. That said there is a clear increase in complexity and process. We should be concerned about a 75% increase for Non Social Care matters.

Social Care - Complaint Volumes by Stage

- Informal / Representation: 110 cases
- Stage 1 (Formal): 61 cases
- Stage 2 (Formal Review): 8 cases
- Stage 3 / Panel: 3 cases
- Ombudsman (LGSCO): Upheld 4 cases
- **Total Children's Social Care complaints: 181 cases**

Complaint Type	2025-26	2024-25	2023-24	%
Childrens Social Care	181	197	147	-8%
Childrens Non Social Care	561	321	265	+75%

Most Social Care complaints received are from parents and not necessarily representing the voice or best interest of the child. However, more of the issues raised in 2025-26 have qualified for the statutory process and escalation route to stage 2 and 3.

Children's Social Care	**2025-26**	**2024-25**	**2023-24**
Representations	110	115	75
Stage 1	**61**	**82**	**64**
Stage 2	**8**	**5**	**5**
Stage 3	3	1	1
LGSCO	4	2	1

Children's Social Care complaints show a clear shift in demand and escalation patterns over the past three years. Overall representations have reduced from 115 in 2024–25 to 110 in 2025–26, with Stage 1 complaints similarly decreasing (from 82 to 61), suggesting either improved early resolution or a change in how concerns are being managed at the front end. However, there has been a notable increase in progression to formal escalation, with Stage 2 complaints rising to 8 (from 5) and Stage 3 increasing to 3 (from 1), indicating that while volumes are lower, a higher proportion of cases are more complex or contested. Ombudsman approaches remain low in volume, but persistent year-on-year, with 4 approaches in 2025–26 compared to only 1 the

previous year, reinforcing that a small cohort of cases continues to present higher levels of challenge and scrutiny. Overall, the data suggests improving front-end control alongside increasing complexity in a smaller number of escalated cases, which carry disproportionate workload and reputational risk.

Themes (by frequency)

1. Quality of Service
    - Social worker conduct
    - Perceived lack of support
    - Accuracy and professionalism of assessments
2. Communication Failures
    - Lack of updates
    - Delayed responses
    - Poor information sharing with parents/carers
3. Disagreement with Decision
    - Child protection conference outcomes
    - Safeguarding thresholds
    - Case closure or step-down decisions
4. Service Provision
    - Delays in assessments
    - Failure to provide agreed support
    - Transition / placement issues
5. Safeguarding
    - Handling of Section 47 enquiries
    - Alleged failure to protect
    - Concerns about decision-making processes
6. Customer Service
    - Perceived bias
    - Families feeling unheard
    - Complaints handling dissatisfaction
7. Misconduct / Professional Practice
    - Allegations of inappropriate behaviour
    - Conflict of interest
    - Unprofessional conduct
8. Data / Confidentiality
    - GDPR concerns
    - Information sharing errors (low volume but high impact)

3. Outcomes Overview
- Non-Justified: Majority of cases
- Partly Justified: Common in communication and service quality cases
- Justified: Minority, typically linked to clear service failure or delay
- Withdrawn / Not a Complaint / Duplicate: Small but recurring proportion

4. Key Observations
- Complaints are predominantly case-specific, not systemic
- Communication and relationship-based issues are the strongest drivers of dissatisfaction
- Escalation usually reflects recurrence, not severity alone

- Stage 2 and Ombudsman cases often involve:
  - Repeated complaints
  - Safeguarding disagreement
  - Perceived lack of learning or change after Stage 1

Stage 2 Complaints

The cases that escalated to stage 2 have increase as has general case complexity. Family dynamics and financial outcomes often the real underlying issue rather than the YPs voice

Identifier	IO Cost	IP Cost
D	**Ongoing**	
F	**IO £2800**	**IP £0**
O	**IO £0**	**IP £0**
R	**IO £0**	**IP £0**
S	**Ongoing**	
W	**IO £2205**	**IP £1192.50**
Y	**IO £2284.30**	**IP £1507.50 plus £150**
		TOTAL £10,139.30

Stage 3

H	**Chair £542.50**	**Panel £275.00 and £275.00**
L	**Chair £507.50**	**Panel £350 and £140**
Y	**Chair £612.50**	**Panel £395.00 and £305.00**

Combined Total: £13,541.80

Local Government Ombudsman (LGSCO)

The Local Government Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) investigates complaints from the public about councils and other bodies providing public services in England. It also investigates complaints about registered social care providers.

Across Children's services, upheld Ombudsman cases continue to be predominantly concentrated in Non-Social Care (particularly SEND and school-related provision), with a smaller but important number arising from Children's Social Care. In Non-Social Care, upheld findings are largely driven by delays in Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan processes, failure to secure provision, and gaps in alternative education, often resulting in children missing education and requiring financial remedies and service improvements.

In contrast, upheld cases within Children's Social Care are fewer in number (just 4) but tend to relate to procedural failings, and delivery of agreed support, rather than frontline safeguarding decisions themselves. These cases typically involve failures to follow statutory processes, delays in progressing complaints, or gaps in care support and respite provision, leading to distress and the need for apology and redress.

Overall, the pattern highlights that while Social Care complaints present reputational and procedural risk, the greatest volume and systemic risk remains within SEND and education

provision, where statutory duties and timescales are tightly defined and where failures have a direct and measurable impact on children's access to education.

CHILDRENS Non Social Care (SEND)

Children's Whole Authority (Non-Social Care) complaints show a clear and sustained increase in demand over the three-year period. Representations have more than doubled from 62 in 2024–25 to 137 in 2025–26 (having remained broadly stable the previous year), while formal complaints have risen significantly from 182 in 2023–24 to 424 in 2025–26. This reflects both increased pressure within services, particularly SEND, and growing customer engagement and challenge. Despite this rise in volume, Ombudsman upheld findings have reduced from 25 in 2024–25 to 17 in 2025–26, indicating improved handling, stronger responses at local level, and better alignment with Ombudsman expectations. Overall, the trend reflects a service area experiencing rapid growth in demand but demonstrating increasing ability to manage complaints effectively and reduce external adverse findings.

Children's Whole Authority (Non Social Care)	**2025-26**	**2024-25**	**2023-24**
Representations	137	62	66
Formal Complaint	424	253	182
LGSCO upheld	17	25	21

Which customer groups made the complaints;

Of the small number of complainants who categorised themselves, we present the following data on who is complaining to children's services Social Care

Customer Type	**Total**
Advocate	21
Anon	1
Business	2
Child in Care	3
Customer	894
Foster carer	3
Government	1
Grandparent	5
Independent Person	2
Individual	143
Member of Parliament (MP)	27
Member of the Public	11
None	1
Officer	1
Ombudsman	16
Other	5
other relative	9
Parent	160

Relative	11
Relative/Carer	2
Representative/Advocate	1
Solicitor	3
Young Person	2

The types of complaints made;

Most complaints fall under subcategories of Service Provision, largely around delays of perceived failures to deliver a

- Quality of Service: 45.0%
- Disagreement with Decision: 18.9%
- Service Provision: 17.8%
- Communication: 7.2%
- Customer Service: 3.9%
- Other: 3.9%
- Misconduct: 2.2%
- Data: 0.6%

The outcome of complaints;

Of the complaints received for Children's Social Care in 2025-26 only 10% were considered Fully Justified by operational managers shows there is some level of justification as outlined below:

Children in Care

The table below demonstrates a breakdown of Children in Care complaints. All complaints by young people are coming to the Complaints team via an advocacy service. The numbers continue to be low, but we have had 2 cases progress to Stage 3 from the previous year which indicates a greater level of awareness of the process, and confidence in using it the have their voices heard.

Year	Number of Complaints
Children in Care 2025-26	6
Children in Care 2024-25	3
Children in Care 2023-24	3
Children in Care 2022-23	10
Children in Care 2021-22	8
Children in Care 2020-21	15
Children in Care 2019-20	10

Advocacy is described as supporting children to have their say and making sure their views and wishes are taken into consideration on decisions and matters that affect them, it is also about ensuring that rights are upheld. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out the right of children to be listened to in decisions which affect them.

There is a statutory duty to provide an independent advocacy service that supports children and young people to have their views and wishes taken into account when key decisions are being made about their lives.

An advocate can help if:

something needs to be started, changed or stopped, for example, if the child is unhappy about their treatment by children's social care or there are worries about plans being made, such as a move a child needs support during meetings to make sure their voice is heard children need advice and want to know their rights

a child needs support to make a complaint

In 2025-26 we have identified just the 6 cases that related to children in care, all via an advocate representing the voice of the child through the complaints process. You will note the figures are consistently low by comparison to the overall figures. 3 partially upheld

Only 1 case was presented to the LGSCO who noted the approach was premature, and we held a stage 2 investigation

Children in Care (CIC)

1 – Worries after Social Worker visit. Financial recompense request (not upheld)
2 – Unaware of School Move – poor communication (Partially upheld)
3 – Perception of scary Social Worker and lack of assurances (Partially upheld)
4 – Delay in providing support (Justified)
5 – Felt unsupported during college move – (not upheld)
6 – Decision regarding being taken into care – (not upheld)

Whilst we welcome opportunities to listen to and learn from the experiences of care-experienced young people, the statutory complaints process is designed to consider concerns about service delivery and decision-making rather than to revisit historic approaches to compensation or financial redress. As such, we regret that we are unable to use the formal complaints process to retrospectively review compensation arrangements from previous years. However, we remain committed to listening to the lived experiences of young people, understanding the impact that decisions may have had on them, and using that feedback to inform ongoing service improvement.

Compliance with timescales, and complaints resolved within extended timescale as agreed;

The table below show the majority of all Stage 1 cases for Children's Services Social Care were within the 20-day statutory timescale. We have put escalation protocols in place to ensure there is oversight at the correct level of seniority

Timescales	2024-25	2024-25	2023-24

0-20 Working Days	82%	77%	86%
20+ days	18%	23%	14%

As always, closer observation reveals that some cases exceed the 20 days as a result of agreeing a more informal approach and resolution after the receipt of the original complaint, with good work from locality managers. This can include follow up calls and meetings, so the figure in isolation does not tell the whole story of the journey of the complaints.

learning and service improvement, including changes to services that have been implemented and details of any that have not been implemented;

Learning points are collected at all stages of the complaints procedure. At stage 1, Operational Managers identify learning from complaints and learning actions. At Stages 2 and 3, action plans are compiled based on the recommendations of the investigator's or panel chair's report. In addition, the LGSCO will include recommendations to remedy complaints, and actions are monitored by the complaints team to ensure that they are completed.

How we disseminate learning

Quarterly reports to Children's Services Leadership Team produced by the Complaints team

Dissemination of the quarterly report to Operational Managers to be discussed at Service Team Meetings.

The complaints team also feed into the performance data for SLT each quarter

How we learn from complaints

Improvement in Stage 1 responses - Additional Training to be provided to Team Managers on how to complete and present and stage one investigations, within statutory timescales. The Complaints Team Manager will be attending meetings to advise and update

Operational Managers to ensure that Team Managers and Social Workers are clear about the need to record meetings. Robust quality assurance processes put in place.

Improved use of complaints as a measure of performance and quality control:

Evidence of sharing of quarterly reports in QAudits and closing loop with service managers. Identifying trends early

Examples of learning from Social Care Complaints:

A review of Children's Social Care complaints for 2025–26 identified learning points in 27 individual cases, demonstrating a strong and consistent use of complaints as a driver for service improvement. The most prominent theme is communication, which underpins the majority of learning—specifically the need for clearer, more timely updates, better explanation of decisions, and ensuring families feel listened to and respected. This is closely followed by quality of practice and recording, including accuracy of reports, sharing of meeting minutes, and ensuring that decisions and case closures are clearly documented and communicated.

A second key theme relates to professional practice and relationships, with learning focused on maintaining respectful engagement, managing conflict, and ensuring social workers adapt their

approach to meet individual family needs. There is also recurring learning around inclusion and participation, particularly ensuring that children's voices are heard, both parents are involved where appropriate, and families are properly supported to engage in meetings and decision-making processes. In addition, several cases highlight the importance of timeliness and responsiveness, including delays in communication, escalation, and follow-up actions.

Finally, a smaller but significant group of cases relate to safeguarding decision-making and process clarity, where learning has focused on early information sharing, reflective practice, and ensuring robust oversight of decisions. Across the dataset, the organisational response has been proactive, with actions including staff supervision, targeted training, process changes, and in some cases financial remedies. Overall, the learning demonstrates a clear pattern: improving communication, consistency, and clarity of practice remains central to both reducing complaints and improving outcomes for children and families.

Children's Non-Social Care (SEND / Education / Family Help)
Across 100 complaints, there is a high volume of systemic learning:

- Communication and delays overwhelmingly dominate, particularly around EHCP processes, updates, and responsiveness.
- Process and statutory compliance failures are significant (missed timescales, delays in provision, case oversight).
- Ongoing challenges linked to capacity, staff absence, and demand pressures are clearly impacting service delivery.

A summary of statistical data about the age, gender, disability, sexual orientation and ethnicity of complainants

All complainants to Dorset Council are sent an equality and diversity monitoring form as part of the complaint process. Complainants are asked to complete this form but it is completely voluntary. This year we had a 70% uptake. The percentages are based on those who completed the form only and not specific to Children's Services as they are anonymous

Gender

- Female: 54.5%
- Male: 30.7%
- Prefer not to say: 9.0%
- Prefer to self-describe: 0.8%
- Non-Binary: 0.4%
- Missing: 4.6%

Gender Assigned at Birth

- Yes: 85.2%
- Prefer not to say: 7.9%
- No: 0.6%
- Missing: 6.3%

Age Group

- 55–64: 18.6%
- 35–44: 21.2%
- 45–54: 17.5%
- 65–74: 15.4%
- 25–34: 11.2%
- 75–84: 7.1%
- 19–24: 3.8%
- Over 85: 2.6%
- 16–18: 1.0%
- Missing: 1.6%

Disability Status

- No: 51.8%
- Yes: 25.6%
- Prefer not to say: 12.2%
- Missing: 10.4%

Ethnicity

- White - British: 74.3%
- Prefer not to say: 3.5%
- White - Other White background: 2.4%
- Other ethnicities: ~1–2% combined
- Missing: 18.0%

Sexual Orientation

- Heterosexual/Straight: 69.8%
- Prefer not to say: 11.6%
- Bi: 2.1%
- Other: 1.5%
- Gay Woman/Lesbian: 1.2%
- Gay Man: 1.1%
- Missing: 12.7%

Religion or Belief

- None/no religion: 37.2%
- Christian (all denominations): 32.6%
- Prefer not to say: 11.8%
- Atheist: 2.1%
- Other religions: ~3–4% combined
- Missing: 13.9%

Key differences vs 2024–25

- Female proportion increased (49% → 54%)
- Disability increased (21% → 25.6%)
- Missing data improved across most categories
- Age profile slightly younger peak (35–44 now highest)
- Ethnicity data improved slightly (less missing)

Compliments – 523
Alongside the complaints presented within this report, it is encouraging to note that 523 compliments were received during 2025/26. Although slightly less than the previous year, we note it takes effort to complement a job well done and are grateful to those that took the time to offer a more balanced critique of our services.

This included 205 compliments within Place, 113 within Adult Social Care, 92 within Corporate Services, **61 within Children's Wellbeing and Assessment, 38 within Children's Social Care**, and 14 within Adult Wellbeing and Assessment. The significant number of residents taking the time to acknowledge good service demonstrates the commitment of colleagues across the Council and serves as an important reminder that the vast majority of interactions with our services are positive and valued by those we support. These compliments provide a welcome balance to complaint reporting and highlight the positive difference staff continue to make to the lives of Dorset residents every day.