

## How to complain about Children's Social Care Services

With complaints it is far easier to find out what happened and put things right if you tell us straight away. As time passes it becomes more difficult to investigate events fairly and fully – people's memories fade, staff who were involved leave the Council, or records may no longer be available. For these reasons, we will normally only accept complaints made within **twelve months** of the incident or circumstances that led to the complaint.

If your complaint is older please contact us so that we can tell you about other ways that might still be available to solve your problem.

You can make a complaint:

- online by using the link on our [Complaints, comments, compliments](#) page
- by filling in our Customer Feedback form, which is available from libraries and other customer access points throughout the county
- by email [somersetdirect@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:somersetdirect@somerset.gov.uk)
- by text 07781 482858
- by phone 0300 123 2224
- by writing to us at

Somerset County Council  
Comments, Compliments, Complaints  
Customer Contact,  
FREEPOST NAT 9109,  
Taunton,  
Somerset  
TA1 4ZA

## Getting help to make a complaint

If you are a young person and need help making a complaint we will offer you an advocate who will make sure your views are heard. An advocate is an independent person who will offer you advice and help you get your point across if you are unhappy with a service or a decision that has been made that affects you.

Advocacy may also be available to help you if you are an adult making a complaint.

If you would like help to make your complaint please contact the Customer Experience Team (please see contact details above) who will be able to give you more information on what support is available.

## **How will you deal with my complaint?**

The way most complaints against Children's Social Care services are dealt with is set by regulations under the Children's Act 1989. You can find out more about this in a Government guidance document called 'Getting the best from Complaints (DfE) 2006. This statutory children's complaints process has three stages. Sometimes a complaint is more general and in those cases we will deal with it in two stages through our Council's complaints procedures.

### **Informal Resolution**

Our aim is to deal fairly with complaints and solve problems as quickly as possible. Most problems can be sorted out locally. If your Social Worker can't help you, ask to see their Manager (or Team Leader). This will probably mean making an appointment. Tell them what has gone wrong, give them a chance to look into it and, if necessary, put things right.

If we can't resolve your complaint informally, then you may wish to lodge a formal complaint.

### **Stage 1 – local resolution**

The first stage in the formal complaints process is an investigation by the service. This gives the service a chance to look into the complaint and sort it out as soon as possible if something has gone wrong. Stage 1 follows the same process for both statutory complaints and those being dealt with through the Council's own complaints procedures.

A manager from the service will reply to your complaint within 10 working days. Sometimes this may take longer depending on the issues involved. If this is anticipated, they will let you know and agree a new date with you.

## **What happens if you are not happy with the response from the service team?**

You can contact the Customer Experience team if you wish to take the matter further. We will talk to you about your reasons, and will discuss and agree the best way to take your complaint forward. In some cases, mediation or dispute resolution are the most effective ways to resolve complaints. In other cases it may be that a formal independent investigation (Stage 2 of the complaints process) is the best option. Whichever route is agreed, we aim to provide a full response within 20 working days or 25 working days where the complaint is being dealt with under the

statutory process. We will keep you updated on progress and will let you know if for any reason it is likely to take longer.

### **How does a formal Stage 2 investigation work?**

A Stage 2 investigation is carried out by someone who is independent from the service. The investigation should be completed within 20 working days. For complaints that are being dealt with through the statutory process, an Independent Person is also appointed who will oversee how the investigating officer carries out their investigation. An investigation under the statutory process should be completed within 25 working days, but this may where necessary be extended to a maximum of 65 working days.

Key points about Stage 2 investigations:

- The Customer Experience team will be your point of contact during the investigation and will appoint an investigator and, where appropriate, an independent person.
- Before the investigation starts, the investigator will receive a copy of all the complaints correspondence so far. He or she will then contact you to arrange to meet with you to discuss your complaints in detail and to discuss what outcome you would like as a result of the investigation.
- The investigator will write to you following the meeting to confirm the areas of complaint to be investigated and the outcomes sought, for agreement before the investigation can start.
- If you are making the complaint on behalf of another person, then it will be necessary to have their consent before starting the investigation.
- The investigator will then decide who he or she needs to meet with, and what relevant policies, procedures and legislation he needs to consult. The investigator will keep a record of any interviews, and will check this with interviewees for accuracy.
- When the investigation is complete, the investigating officer will write a report and recommendations. Where an independent person has been appointed, he or she will also write a report which will give their view on how the investigation has been carried out, and the recommendations.

- The report and recommendations will be sent to the Deputy Director, Children and Families for consideration and adjudication.
- The Deputy Director or a senior manager will then write to you with his or her final decision on your complaint(s), and what actions will be taken as a result. You will receive a copy of the report with this letter.

### **What happens next?**

A copy of the adjudication letter and report will be sent to the service manager responsible for the service that has been complained about for information, and to implement any actions that have been identified as a result of the investigation.

If you remain unhappy with any part of the response, then you should contact the Customer Experience team within 20 working days to arrange a meeting with the Service Director to discuss his or her response. Where your complaint is being dealt with under the statutory complaints process, then you may request escalation to Stage 3.

You can escalate your complaint direct to the Local Government Ombudsman at any time during the complaints process. Their contact details are:

The Local Government Ombudsman  
PO Box 4771  
Coventry CV4 0EH  
Tel: 0300 061 0614 Fax 024 7682 0001  
Website: <http://www.lgo.org.uk>

### **Stage 3**

Stage 3 is the final stage of the statutory complaints process, and is an opportunity for your complaint to be considered by a panel of three people who are entirely independent of the Council.

You will need to notify the Customer Experience within 20 working days of receipt of your Stage 2 response if you wish to escalate your complaint to Stage 3.

The Council will arrange a date for the Panel to meet to review your complaint within 30 working days of your request for escalation. In advance of that hearing, the Panel will be sent copies of the complaints files and you will be given an opportunity to provide a written summary of your complaint and why you are still dissatisfied, and what you would like to happen to put things right. You will also receive a copy of all the other documentation that is to be presented at the hearing. You can be

accompanied by someone who can support you and speak on your behalf if you would like this.

At the panel hearing your case will be discussed with yourself, the investigating officers, and the senior manager responsible for the service and the Panel may ask questions if they need clarification of any points. The panel will review your complaint and will write a report and recommendations for any actions the Council might reasonably take to resolve your complaint. This will be shared with both yourself and the Council within 5 working days of the Panel hearing. The Director, Children and Families, will provide the Council's response to the report and recommendations within 15 working days.

If, for any reason, these timescales cannot be met then this will be discussed with you and new timescales agreed where appropriate.

Stage 3 completes consideration of your complaint by the Council. If you remain unhappy with the outcome of your complaint at this point you may wish to escalate your complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman, although you may choose to do this at any point during the complaints process. Their contact details are provided above.

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