

Delegated Decision Report

Decision below £250k



Subject:	Additional resource to manage Children's Social Care Complaints
Decision maker: Senior Officer	Fran Lautman, Assistant Director of Customer Experience
Decision maker: Cabinet Member	Cllr Peter Dean, Cabinet Member for Thriving Communities
Decision date:	02.04.2025
Report author:	Leo Morgan, Complaints Manager
Ward (s):	All

1. Reason for decision

The purpose of this report is to seek approval to recruit a temporary, fixed-term Senior Complaints Officer via the Council's agency staffing contract (Reed) for a six-month period. The role will be contracted for 2.5 days per week (18.32 hours) to provide additional capacity in response to increasing demand within the Complaints Team in Children's Social Care and school contract SLA delivery. Details on how this time will be managed are outlined within the report.

Between January and March 2025, the service received 45 complaints and 16 representations, compared to 23 complaints and 32 representations during the same period in 2024. This reflects a marked increase in formal complaints, many of which are complex and require statutory investigation. This represents a 96% increase in complaints and an 11% overall increase in total casework.

This shift in both volume and case type has placed increased pressure on the team's capacity to meet statutory timescales and maintain quality. The immediate additional support will help ensure that complaints are managed effectively, statutory deadlines are met, and complainants, particularly children, young people, and families, receive timely and appropriate responses.

Failure to act will likely result in further breaches of statutory timescales, increased risk of escalation to the Ombudsman, reputational damage to the Council, and reduced confidence from both residents and school partners.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1 Approve the appointment of a temporary Senior Complaints Officer, on a part-time (18.32), six-month temporary contract, to assist with Children's Social Care, complex cases, and school contract SLA-related complaints.

3. Background

Over the last 3 months, Children's Social Care has experienced a sharp rise in both complaint volumes and complexity, placing sustained pressure on the Complaints Team. Between January and March 2025, the service received 45 complaints and 16 representations, up from 23 complaints and 32 representations during the same period in 2024. This represents a 96% increase in formal complaints and an overall 11% rise in total casework, indicating a clear shift toward more serious and resource-intensive issues.

This increase, combined with the demands of delivering the school contract SLA to 25 schools, has resulted in significant workload pressures across the team.

A Senior Complaints Officer will be recruited via the Council's agency staffing contract to provide targeted, short-term support during a period of high operational demand. The role requires a candidate with a strong understanding of statutory complaints processes, local authority policy, and practice, particularly within Children's Social Care and school traded service delivery. This additional capacity will ensure the service can respond effectively to complex casework, meet its statutory duties, and uphold service quality.

This proposal provides immediate capacity support and enables knowledge transfer within the team, while longer-term workforce planning is progressed to strengthen future resilience and ensure sustainable service delivery.

4. Current Position

4.1 Capacity and Demand

Historically, the Complaints Team was resourced with two Senior Complaints Officers: one with a focus on Children's Social Care, and the other primarily handling Adults Social Care. However, this has since been reduced to a single Senior Complaints Officer who is now responsible for managing complex cases across the entire portfolio: Children's Social Care, Adults Social Care, and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) referrals. This consolidation has placed additional pressure on the remaining senior officer, affecting the team's capacity to respond to demand effectively.

A second Complaints Officer is currently being supported and developed to manage both adult and children's complaints. While their progress is positive, their knowledge and confidence in managing the complexities of these statutory complaints is still maturing and will require continued oversight and development support.

4.2 Complaints Performance

As of 1 April 2025, there are 70 open social care complaints, of which 41 relate to Children's Services. Of these children's complaints, 76% are currently overdue, exceeding the statutory timescales for response. Additionally, two active Stage 3 complaints are ongoing, both of which demand significant preparation, coordination with independent panels, and dedicated officer time.

To date in 2024/2025, 85 complaints have been closed in Children's Social Care. With 41 complaints still open, the service is projected to manage a total of 126 complaints this year. By comparison, in 2023/2024, the team dealt with 91 children's complaints in total. This represents a 38% increase in complaint volume year-on-year, demonstrating a substantial uplift in demand that cannot be sustainably met with current staffing levels.

4.3 Statutory Children's Complaints

Children's Social Care complaints are consistently complex and high-risk in nature. They frequently involve safeguarding concerns, looked-after children, care planning disputes, and legal obligations under the Children Act 1989 and related statutory guidance. These cases require not only a detailed understanding of relevant legislation but also the ability to coordinate across multiple services, manage sensitive information, and respond to families with care and professionalism.

Failure to handle these complaints thoroughly and within statutory timescales can lead to significant consequences, including regulatory intervention, Ombudsman criticism, and reputational damage to the Council. The level of expertise and scrutiny required for such casework goes beyond standard complaint handling and demands an experienced officer with specialist knowledge in children's services and statutory complaint procedures.

4.4 School SLA Contract

Alongside statutory duties, the Complaints Team delivers a traded Complaints Management SLA for schools. For 2025/2026, 25 schools have purchased the offer, with further uptake expected. The SLA includes key deliverables such as governor training, specialist advice, and direct support with complex complaints. This traded offer represents a critical income stream for the service and plays a key role in strengthening relationships with education providers.

However, there is currently a skills and capacity gap within the team, particularly in handling education-related complaints and delivering governor training. Without additional experienced support, there is a clear risk to delivery, which could impact both income retention and future growth of the SLA offer. The proposed appointment ensures continuity, fulfils contractual obligations, and protects the Council's reputation as a trusted partner to schools.

5. Forecast and Demand

5.1 Anticipated Seasonal Increase

Analysis of previous years' complaint data highlights a potential seasonal spike in Children's Social Care complaints, particularly between May and July. This trend is often linked to increased family contact with services during school holidays, end-of-year reviews, and transitions between education and care settings.

Importantly, this anticipated seasonal rise is in addition to the significant increase already observed between January and March 2025, when complaint volumes nearly doubled compared to the same period in 2024. As such, the team is likely to face further escalation in

demand over the coming months, compounding existing pressures on capacity and performance.

5.2 Governor Training and SLA Commitments

The delivery of governor training to schools participating in the Complaints Management SLA is scheduled for the Autumn term. This is a key part of our traded offer and requires planning, coordination, and delivery capacity from experienced officers. As the number of participating schools increases, so too does the demand for expert support in both training and direct complaint handling. Without sufficient capacity, there is a risk of falling short of expectations set out in the SLA and reputational impact with schools.

5.3 New Children's Homes Complaints Policy

The service is preparing to launch a new Children's Homes Complaints Policy, designed to improve how we listen and respond to the voices of young people living in care. While this policy represents a significant improvement in engagement and accountability, it is anticipated that the introduction of more accessible and youth-friendly pathways may lead to an initial increase in complaint volumes as young people become more confident and empowered to raise concerns.

5.4 System Development

This year, we also plan to implement a new complaints case management system that will enhance our ability to track performance, identify themes, and ensure timely responses. However, successful implementation will require active input from the team during the development phase, particularly in designing workflows, defining data requirements, and ensuring the system captures the right information to reflect the complexity of social care complaints. This will place additional demands on existing officers, further reducing frontline complaint-handling capacity during the rollout period.

6 Role and Responsibilities

The Senior Complaints Officer will be engaged on a part-time basis (18.32 hours per week), for a period of six months. Their role will focus on supporting the service to respond effectively to the current and forecasted pressures, with a clear emphasis on:

- Managing complex complaints within Children's Social Care, including LGSCO and Stage 2/3 statutory complaints.
- Providing expert oversight and direct input into the Complaints Management SLA, including the delivery of governor training.
- Supporting the learning and development of existing team members, with a particular focus on complaints legislation, quality of responses, and professional standards.
- Contributing to the successful design and implementation of the new complaints case management system, ensuring the children's complaints functionality reflects real practice requirements.

6.2 Time Allocation

Activity Area	Estimated Weekly Hours	Description
Complex Children's Complaints Casework	8 hours	Managing high-risk and overdue statutory complaints; quality assuring responses; liaising with services and families.
School SLA & Governor Training	4.5 hours	Supporting traded service offer; assisting with school complaints; preparing and delivering Autumn term governor training.
Team Development & Mentoring	3 hours	Providing on-the-job support to the developing officer; sharing practice knowledge and reviewing responses together.
System Development Input	2 hours	Attending system development meetings; advising on children's complaints functionality and data requirements.
General Liaison/Admin	0.82 hours	Emails, planning, record keeping, internal meetings.

Note: Time allocations may vary week to week depending on live case demands, but this structure provides a balanced approach aligned to current needs.

6.3 Key Outcomes

The temporary appointment of a Senior Complaints Officer is expected to deliver measurable operational and strategic benefits over the six-month period. Anticipated outcomes include:

- Approximately 10 complex complaints closed per month, helping reduce the backlog and improve compliance with statutory timescales.
- 100% delivery of governor training for all participating schools during the Autumn term, fulfilling contractual commitments.
- Maintains credibility of the traded offer to schools, supporting retention and potential growth of the 2025/2026 SLA cohort (25 schools to date).
- Supports internal staff through coaching and knowledge transfer, strengthening long-term capacity and reducing future reliance on temporary support.
- Support system improvement by ensuring frontline insight informs long-term service design.

By embedding this time strategically across these high-impact areas, the temporary Senior Complaints Officer will play a crucial role in stabilising current performance while supporting sustainable improvement across the service.

7 Reporting and Monitoring

Regular oversight will be maintained by the Complaints Manager, with progress updates shared monthly with the Assistant Director of Customer Experience. A formal review of expected outcomes at Month 3 will be undertaken to ensure progress is being made.

Any risks, barriers, or emerging opportunities will be escalated through existing service governance structures. This structured approach ensures that the temporary appointment

delivers both immediate value and informs future decisions around capacity, capability, and service design.

In addition to monthly monitoring, the service will establish a task and finish group in collaboration with Children's Social Care to review current processes, share best practice, and embed learning from complex complaints. This group will support the ongoing improvement of statutory complaint handling and strengthen the link between operational practice and customer experience.

8 Alternative option(s) to be considered *(please give the reason(s) for recommendation(s))*

No alternative option is being considered.

9 Consultation *(include any conflict of interest declared by relevant Cabinet Member consulted)*

Not applicable.

10 Risks

Several service and organisational risks have been identified in relation to the current complaint's pressures and the proposed temporary appointment.

10.1 Risks if the Appointment Is Not Approved

Risk	Impact	Likelihood	Mitigation if Appointment Proceeds
Non-compliance with statutory timescales for Children's Social Care complaints	Reputational damage, regulatory scrutiny, potential LGSCO findings	High	Additional capacity will reduce the backlog and support timely responses
Escalation of complex complaints to Stage 3 or Ombudsman	Increased resource demands, risk of adverse findings or compensation	Medium-High	Experienced officer can manage complex cases and reduce escalation risk
Failure to deliver SLA commitments to schools	Breach of contract, reputational harm, loss of income	Medium	The officer's experience with school complaints and governor training supports SLA delivery
Staff burnout and reduced retention within the team	Reduced performance, increased absence or turnover	Medium-High	Additional support helps balance workloads and creates space for development
Delays in implementing the new complaints system	Missed improvement opportunities, system not fit for purpose	Medium	Officers input supports a system design that reflects real frontline needs

10.2 Risks Associated with the Temporary Appointment

Risk	Impact	Likelihood	Mitigation
Short-term appointment may create a dependency	Reduced stability after contract ends	Low-Medium	Focus on knowledge transfer and development of existing staff to build internal resilience
Availability or capacity constraints (due to part-time nature)	Limited ability to respond to peaks in workload	Medium	Clear prioritisation of complex casework, with oversight from Complaints Manager

11 Implications

Financial	<p>The purpose of this report is to seek approval to appoint to a fixed term post within the Customer Services portfolio.</p> <p>The proposed temporary appointment will be for 18.32 hours per week at an expected hourly rate of £25.00. The cost projections are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly Cost: £25.00 x 18.32 hours = £458.00 per week Monthly Cost (approx. 4.33 weeks per month): £458.00 x 4.33 = £1,982.14 per month Total Cost for 6-Month Contract: £1,982.14 x 6 = £11,892.84 <p>The 6 month estimated cost will be £11,892.84 and must be funded from existing staffing resources within the service. There are no current vacant posts within the service to fund the proposal.</p> <p>Jamie Kelly, Senior Accountant</p>
Legal	<p>The report outlines the increase in complaints and explains that there are certain complaints that legally must be replied to, and within certain timeframes. It is therefore a lawful requirement to comply within the timeframes or risk escalation to the Ombudsman and potentially a reputational and cost implication. The service should also have due regard to staff work levels and wellbeing and the report outlines that the post holder will help alleviate pressure on the team.</p> <p>Alex Bougatef, Interim Borough Solicitor</p>
HR	<p>There is a need to secure short-term staffing cover to manage the risks associated with holding open Childrens Social Care Complaints and HR are supportive of securing this via Reed. It is</p>

	important that knowledge transfer takes place to equip the team moving forwards. Rebecca Jones, HR Manager
Equality impact including implications for Children and Young People	An Equality Impact Assessment is not required for this decision. No adverse impacts on protected groups, children, or young people have been identified.
Other	N/A

Pending decision:


Has the relevant Legal Officer confirmed that the recommendations within this report are lawful and comply with the Council's Constitution?	Yes
Has the relevant Finance Officer confirmed that any expenditure referred to within this report is consistent with the Council's budget?	Yes
Are any of the recommendations within this report contrary to the Policy Framework of the Council?	No

Background Papers under Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

1. N/A

Report author sign-off	Fran Lautman
Role	Assistant Director of Customer Experience
Date of sign-off	01.04.2025

Approval	
Officer approval sign-off	Steve Hughes
Role	Assistant Director of Strategy and Performance
Date of sign-off	02.04.2024

Approval	
Member(s) approval sign-off	
Role	Cabinet Member for Thriving Communities & Culture
Date of sign-off	14/04/2025