

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE
Appointment Centre Room 10 & 11, Town Hall, Romford
27 August 2024 (7.00 - 8.00 pm)**

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group	Jason Frost (Chairman), Judith Holt and Jacqueline McArdle
Havering Residents' Group	Robby Misir, Christine Smith and Julie Wilkes
Labour Group	Frankie Walker (Vice-Chair)
East Havering Residents Group	

The Chairman reminded Members of the action to be taken in an emergency.

6 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received for the absence of Councillor Sarah Edwards.

7 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no interest declared.

8 MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting on 11 July 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

9 CHILDREN'S SERVICES ANNUAL COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS 2023-24

The Sub-Committee was presented with the Children's Service Complaints report.

The report a Local Authority statutory requirement as set out in section 26 Children Act 1989 and The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 to be published annually.

It was noted that improvements had been made since the previous reporting period, indicating progress over the past year, although challenges remained. Members noted a better response rate regarding time scales and the upholding of complaints.

The report informed of an increase in social care complaints however, the rate of upheld complaints did not rise correspondingly. The Ofsted reports from the previous year highlighted significant demand, which impacted social workers' and managers' abilities to respond effectively. Officers acknowledged that this was a focus for improvement in the current year.

In response to an issue regarding the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) service, particularly whether the increase in enquiries was linked to shifting responsibility back to parents for arranging transportation for their children. The Director of Starting Well responded, clarifying that the rise in complaints was not solely due to this changes.

It was indicated that there had been a high turnover within social work areas and delays in SEND responses. The caseload for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) had increased significantly. Additional resources were being allocated to the SEND area, with a focus on engaging with parents to address issues before they escalated into complaints. It was noted that there had been challenges in engaging SEND parents effectively due to a gap in forum participation following the unexpected passing of the previous forum chair.

A Member commented on the ongoing concerns regarding transport for SEND children, emphasizing the stress this placed on families. Officers provided an update on the home-to-school transport policy, which had recently been signed off. The Sub-Committee was informed the service conducted consultations and sought legal advice to ensure the policy met the needs of families. Individual assessments would also be conducted for children, recognised as requiring specialised transport arrangements due to their complex needs.

It was stated that positive feedback was received from parents regarding travel assistance training, which had empowered some young people to use public transport independently. It was noted that the service was committed to closely monitoring the impact of transport arrangements in the coming financial and academic year.

In relation to domestic violence against parents and carers as a common assessment factor in the previous year. It was noted that there had been an increase in such incidents during and immediately after the pandemic due to the isolation policies, which placed strains on families, particularly with young adults displaying challenging behaviours.

The Director of Starting Well clarified that domestic abuse was a significant ongoing concern and had not solely been child-on-parent violence but could

involve other parents as well. The pandemic contributed to household tensions due to families being confined together.

A Member raised concerns about nine complaints related to the home-to-school transport consultation. The Sub-Committee were informed that the complaints stemmed primarily from issues with the consultation process rather than specific transport arrangements for individual children. It was acknowledged that some complaints were indeed about transport delays or experiences, officer agreed to provide a breakdown of these issues.

On the spike in contacts during October, it was explained that there were often seasonal rises in demand, particularly after school holidays, as professionals re-engaged with children who had not been in contact during the break. It was noted that this period had presented capacity challenges for social workers.

The sub-committee informed of the effectiveness of the new complaints management system, which was noted for its ability to produce timely reports indicating response timelines. The Director of Starting Well expressed optimism that this would help expedite processes, allowing managers to follow up on outstanding issues without requiring additional training on a new system. It was reported that complaints had risen by 33% compared to the previous year; however, response times had also improved, with a notable increase in responses completed within ten working days.

This improvement was seen as a testament to the hard work of the service. Additionally, discussions highlighted the ongoing efforts to improve communication with families, particularly in sensitive situations, ensuring parents understood plans and felt heard. Member were informed of a significant data breach in the adoption service which was attributed to human error. The incident was investigated and reported to the Information Commissioner's Office. The Director of Starting Well confirmed that all staff underwent GDPR training and there was ongoing monitoring to prevent future breaches. The Sub-Committee was assured that there had been no further issues arising from this incident, and the Data Protection team was actively managing compliance.

Members noted:

1. The content of the Children's Services Annual Complaints and Compliments Report 2023-24.
2. The content of the Education Services Complaints and Compliments Report 2023-24.
3. The continued learning from complaints and the recognition of good practice through compliments.

10 **ADULT'S SERVICES ANNUAL COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS
2023/24**

The Sub-Committee was presented with the Adult Service Complaints report.

The report is required as part of the remit of 'The Local Authority Social Services & NHS Complaints (England) Regulations 2009 and Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003 to be published annually.

The report outlined the complaints, enquiries, compliments and Member correspondence received during the period April 2023 – March 2024. There was an increase in complaints directed to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO), with nine out of 14 cases dismissed by the LGO. With concerns raised about home care provisions, which were sometimes not addressed until the Ombudsman intervened, leading to disappointment.

It was stated that previously, complaints were directed to service providers who followed their own procedures. Members were informed that the service were often informed of issues only when they escalated to the Ombudsman, which highlighted a gap in accountability. Officers emphasized the need for providers to notify the service of complaints to enhance contract monitoring and quality assurance.

The number of statutory complaints rose to 124, up from 115 the previous year. In officers' opinion the increase was viewed positively, as it suggested a healthy turnover of complaints. The team reported a 15% rise in enquiries, particularly regarding financial issues. Efforts were made to ensure thorough documentation of financial conversations.

It was reported that there was a notable increase 183% in complaints that related to the financial assessment process. The rise was attributed to a combination of staffing changes and procedural adjustments. Members noted the officers' have been tasked with improving processes and addressing the backlog.

It was noted that response times improved, with 75% of complaints addressed within 20 working days. This improvement was credited to officers' efforts in enhancing the service's responsiveness, despite the challenges posed by needing to coordinate with external agencies. There was also an increase in compliments received, from 48 to 90. The service acknowledged the importance of recognising positive feedback alongside complaints, thus emphasizing the value of compliments in maintaining morale.

Discussions included encouraging elected members to utilize the new complaint system portal for logging inquiries on behalf of constituents. The

aim was to streamline the process and improve tracking to prevent issues from being overlooked.

The meeting noted ongoing challenges related to hospital discharge processes and the communication of financial assessments to service users. It was acknowledged that many families struggled with the complexities of post-discharge decisions.

A decline in service user satisfaction and feelings of safety was reported, prompting a need for further analysis to understand the underlying factors. Members of the sub-committee expressed the importance of investigating these trends and their implications for service delivery. The importance of continued monitoring and improvement in service delivery was reiterated.

The Sub-Committee **noted** the contents of the report with the particular challenges faced by the service during 2023-24 with the added pressures resulting from the cost of living crisis and the continued efforts in resolving and learning from complaints.

Members noted:

- (a) the continued use of complaints as a learning tool to identify actions to improve services.
- (b) the continued monitoring by the Service and the Complaints & Information Team to ensure actions are implemented to evidence the service improvements with a view to reduce similar complaints.

The Sub-Committee noted the increase in the positive feedback received by staff, during a particularly difficult period, by way of compliments received and highlighting examples of good practice.

Chairman