

REPORT

To: HOUSING AND SOCIAL WORK SERVICES COMMITTEE		Subject: ANNUAL COMPLAINTS STATUS REPORT 1 APRIL 2013 TO 31 MARCH 2014	
From: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HOUSING & SOCIAL WORK SERVICES / CHIEF SOCIAL WORK OFFICER			
Date: 14 AUGUST 2014	Ref: DM/DOD		

1. Purpose of Report

This report describes and analyses Social Work's performance in handling formal complaints from 01 April 2013 to 31 March 2014.

2. Background

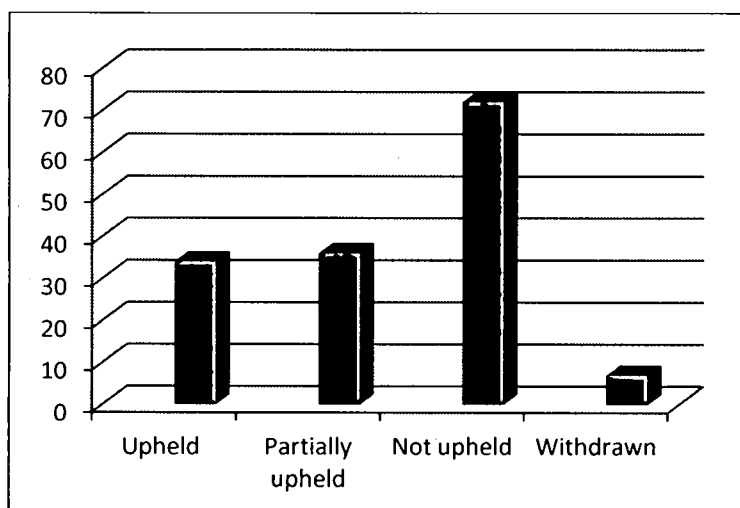
- 2.1 Social Work provides a wide range of statutory and non statutory services to the population of North Lanarkshire. From 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014 approximately 33,265 referrals were made to Social Work. In the same period 149 formal complaints (0.45 % of all referrals) were received.
- 2.2 Complaints information is one of several sources of feedback about staff and service performance used to inform service improvements. Other sources include informal complaints, compliments and enquiries through elected members. Due to the broad nature of informal complaints and compliments these are subject to consideration at a local service level.
- 2.3 Social Work's three stage formal complaints handling process differs from that of other Council services in terms of timescales and in that the third stage of the process allows for complaints to be heard by a Complaints Review Committee (CRC) comprising of three lay persons who are independent of the Council.
- 2.4 A further significant difference is that there can be more than one episode of contact between Social Work and the complainant at the first two stages of the process in an effort to resolve complaints as close as possible to the point of service delivery.
- 2.5 A national review by the Scottish Government of Social Work complaints handling processes concluded its deliberations in February 2014. A decision on review findings has been deferred to allow for further research to be undertaken. In line with statutory requirements Social Work will continue to operate its three stage complaints handling process meantime.
- 2.6 In light of the current integration agenda between Health and Social Work consideration is being given to adoption of complaints handling measures that will more closely align the respective complaints handling processes of the two organisations.

3. Findings

- 3.1 The number of formal complaints received shows an increase of 24 (16%) compared with the previous year. The variation fits within an established long term complaints pattern. An additional eight complaints were investigated by the Care Inspectorate which related to dissatisfaction with home support and care home services.

- 3.2 52% of complaints were made by people who use Social Work services. 44% were made by relatives, predominantly regarding the care and support received by ageing family members or by parents disputing access arrangements or support provision for their children. 4% were made by advocacy workers on behalf of service users.
- 3.3 There are two main performance measures applied to complaints handling. The first is to acknowledge complaints within 5 days; the second, to seek to conclude within 14 days or otherwise to issue an interim letter.
- 3.4 Performance in acknowledging complaints within the 5 calendar day target has continued to be high with 95% acknowledged within the target timescale. Systems introduced to ensure prompt acknowledgement of complaints and immediate distribution onwards for investigation have proven to be effective.
- 3.5 Concluding investigation of first stage complaints within the prescribed 14 calendar day target can present challenges due to the complexity of many Social Work complaints. 57% of all complainants received a full response within 14 days of submission of their complaints and a further 29% were responded to within 15 – 28 days from submission of their complaint. Delays in concluding investigations in the remaining 14% within these timescales generally arose because of the complainant's unavailability, the necessity for meetings to be held with staff or because of the involvement of other agencies. In such instances interim or holding responses are issued.
- 3.6 97% of complaints received were resolved at the first stage of the process, so illustrating a commitment towards reaching resolution close to the complaint source. Five complaints were processed as far as the third stage of the complaints handling process, that of a CRC hearing. Findings from complaints referred to CRCs have predominantly supported the approach and stance taken by Social Work to address and resolve matters and only a minority of complaint grounds have been upheld.
- 3.7 Table 1 below identifies the outcome of complaints. From those concluded, 34 [23%] were fully upheld. A further 36 [24%] were partially upheld, whilst 72, [48%] were not upheld. 7 [5%] were withdrawn.

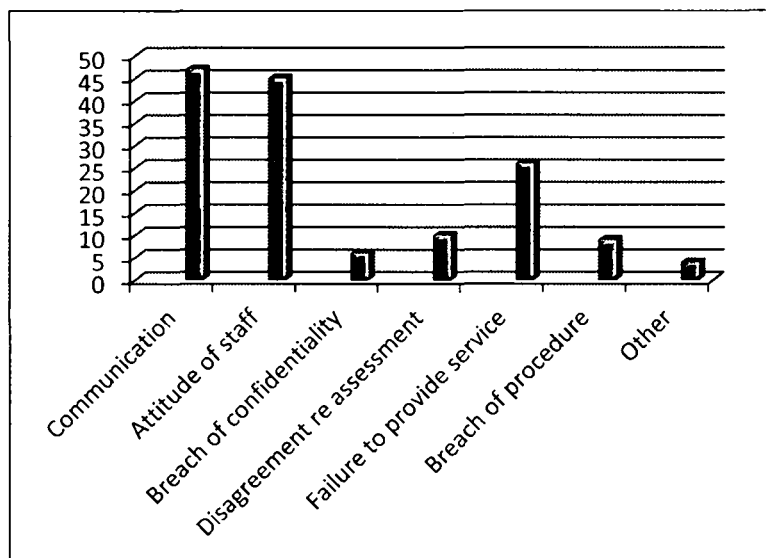
Table 1: Outcome of complaints



4. Basis for complaints

- 4.1 Table 2 below depicts the range of formal complaints received by the Social Work Service against six main descriptors: communication; attitude /conduct of staff; breach of confidentiality; disagreement with assessment; failure to provide agreed level of service and failure to follow procedures.

Table 2: Cause of complaint by category



- 4.2 In line with past trends communication and conduct/attitude of staff remain the most common cause for complaint. These features will often exacerbate underlying issues. For example, failures to promptly notify of service changes or to return phone calls illustrate problems in communication which are often distinct from the main complaint but serve to compound it. Complaints about staff attitude are commonly raised when staff are involved in protection related activities. Often in such situations, service user perceptions of dissatisfaction with Social Work decisions translate into criticisms of staff.
- 4.3 Disagreement with assessments most commonly arise over levels of resources, prioritisation/eligibility decisions or assessment content. Assessment related complaints arising from self-directed support budget allocation featured in 9% of the total complaints and adaptations in less than 4% of the total. Within a context where over 800 people are now in receipt of an individual budget and around 500 requests for home adaptations are assessed annually, the proportion of assessment related complaints against actual service levels is low.
- 4.4 At any given time the in-house home support service provides service to approximately 3400 service users. There were 22 formal complaints received about the service. These formal complaints predominantly arose when home support workers failed to provide services at an agreed time, missed appointments, or did not follow directions set out in personal care plans. Changes to allocation of staff and to service timings without advance discussion were predominant factors in home support related formal complaints. The majority of home support related complaints are dealt with quickly and informally. Those complaints which are dealt with formally will often arise where repeat frustrations arise.
- 4.5 Ensuring confidentiality of data and, where appropriate, access to personal data, has been a prominent objective of the Social Work Service in recent years. Six formal complaints arose as a result of data losses through incorrectly addressed correspondence, lost records or difficulties in accessing records.

5. Learning from complaints

- 5.1 Learning from the formal complaints process and other service feedback processes takes place at two levels, personal and organisational. At the conclusion of all complaints, irrespective of whether or not these are upheld, service managers analyse and report on learning from complaints in order that these might inform individual or service wide practices.
- 5.2 Personal learning for staff directly the subject of complaints or whose practice is scrutinised through the investigation process is generally addressed via management actions and supervision. In most instances change and improvement is achieved through a reflective learning process which examines the appropriateness of staffs' interventions and seeks to establish whether or not a different approach may have achieved a more positive outcome for the complainant. Improvements in communication; changes to work scheduling of home support and worker's achieving a better understanding of the legislative framework they work under are some examples of individual learning arising from complaints.
- 5.3 Organisational learning arises where more consistent areas of complaint emerge which have a wider relevance to the entire service. The provision of a written explanation where service changes are proposed; the increased use of technology in deploying home support staff effectively; improvements in published service information to better manage service user expectation and the introduction of self-assessment process to improve access to minor aids and equipment are examples where complaints have led to organisational changes.

6. Recommendation

Committee is asked to note the report.



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Chief Social Work Officer