

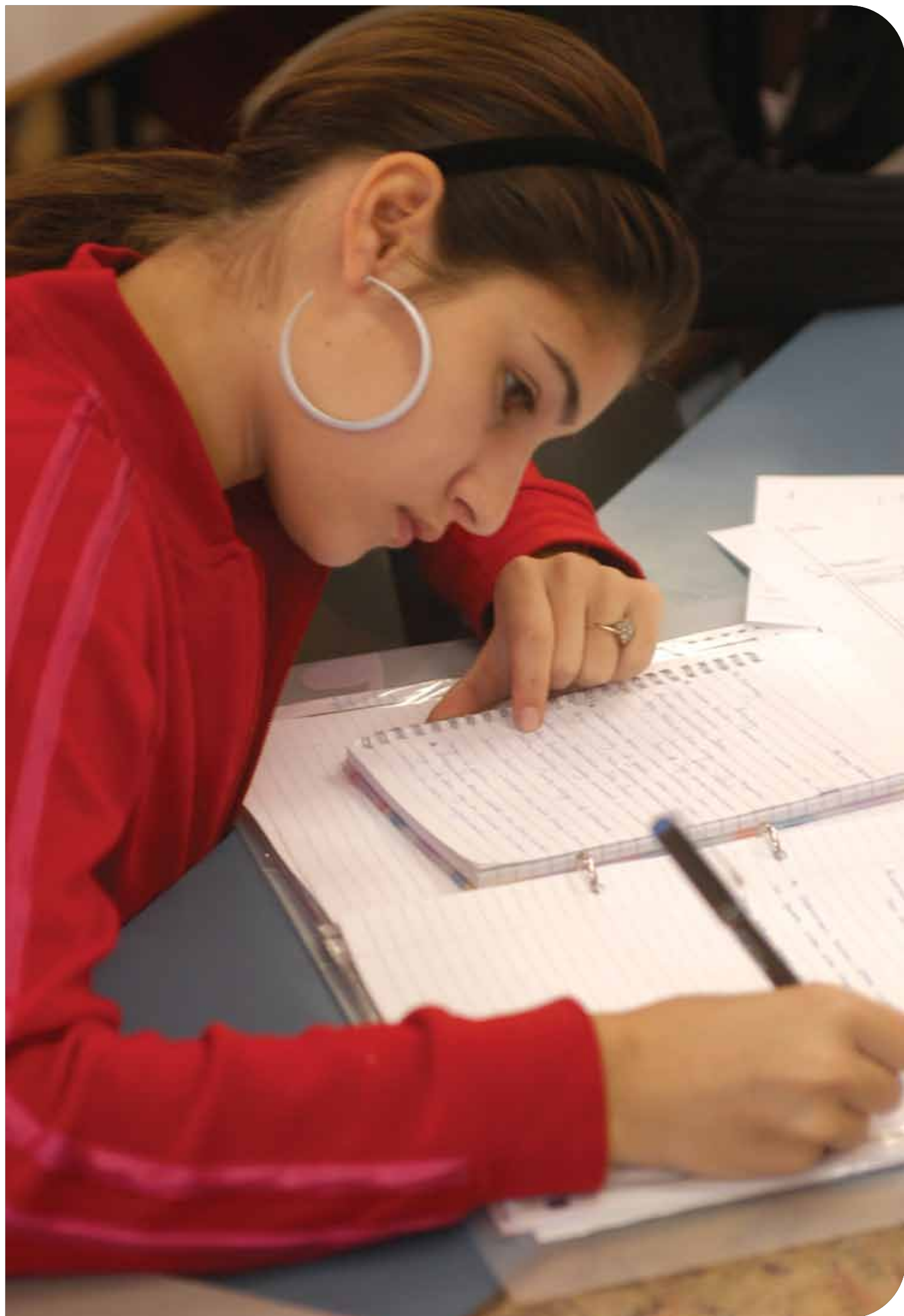
# Young people's views on complaints and advocacy

Reported by the Children's Rights Director for England



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# Introduction

Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England



As Children's Rights Director for England, the law gives me the duty to ask children and young people in care for their views about their rights, their welfare, and how they are looked after in England. The law also gives me the duty to ask children getting any sort of help from council social care services, as well as care leavers and children and young people living away from home in any type of boarding school, residential special school or further education college.

As well as asking children and young people for their views and publishing what they tell us, with my team I also give advice on children's and young people's views and on children's rights and welfare to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the government. I have a duty to raise any issues I think are important about the rights and welfare of children or young people in care, getting children's social care support or living away from home. With my team, I do this both for individual young people and for whole groups of young people.

One thing that children and young people have told us over and over again during the 11 years that I and my team have been asking them for their views, is that it is important that there is a way for children to get something put right if they think it is going wrong in the way they are being looked after. Complaints systems are there for them to use for this – but we know from what children have told us that many do not find them very helpful or easy to use. In this report, we set out children's own views and experiences of making complaints, and we have added in some information about how children come to us for help over their rights and entitlements.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Morgan'.

Dr Roger Morgan OBE  
Children's Rights Director for England





# How we asked young people for their views

For this report, we asked children and young people in care for their views at a big consultation event. As well as this, we invited children and young people to send us their own accounts of the last complaints they had made. We also made some visits to establishments to meet more groups of children and young people.

For our consultation event, we invited children from different local authorities across the country, and did not just choose children we already knew or who were already in local participation groups or Children in Care Councils. We asked all the children who came to the event to take part in a voting session where they gave us their answers to a series of questions we projected on to a screen, using electronic voting pads to tell us what they thought. We then asked the children at the event to give more views in one of a series of discussion groups. As well as this, we visited some establishments to hold discussion groups for other children who had not been at the main consultation event.

Each group we ran was led by a member of the Office of the Children's Rights Director, and another member of our team took notes of the views the children gave. Parents, carers, staff members and other adults who had brought children and young people to our discussion groups were not with the children during the discussions, so that the children could freely talk about their views. We gave children a shopping token to thank them for taking part in our discussions.

At the event, we also set up some electronic screens on which children could enter more views while they were waiting for our groups or during the lunch break. The answers typed on to those screens are included in this report.

As always in children's discussion groups we run, we asked open questions for discussion, but did not suggest any answers. We told the children and young people that they did not have to agree on any 'group views', but could give different views, and could disagree without having to argue for their views against anyone else; we would write down all their different views. We explained that we would be adding children's views together and not saying in this report who said what, and that taking part in our discussions was voluntary.

This report contains, as far as we could note them down, all the views given by the children and young people, not our own views. We have not added our comments. We have not left out any views we might disagree with, or which the government, councils, professionals or research people might disagree with. Where we have used a direct quote from what a child or young person said, this is either something that summarises well what many had said in a group, or something that was a clear way of putting a different idea from what others had said.

As well as our discussion groups, we invited children and young people involved in our events to send us their accounts of the last complaints they had made – what the complaint was about, how it was looked into, and what the result was.

As with all our reports of children's views, we have done our best to write this report so that it can be easily read by young people themselves, by professionals working with young people and by politicians.

You can find and download copies of all our children's views reports on our children's website: [www.rights4me.org](http://www.rights4me.org).





# The young people who gave their views

Altogether, 118 children and young people took part and gave us their views on complaints and advocacy for this report. They included both boys and girls, children and young people from different ethnic backgrounds, children looked after in care in both foster homes and children's homes, care leavers, and a small number of children from boarding schools and residential special schools. The children therefore came from a range of different settings that come within my duty to consult as Children's Rights Director.

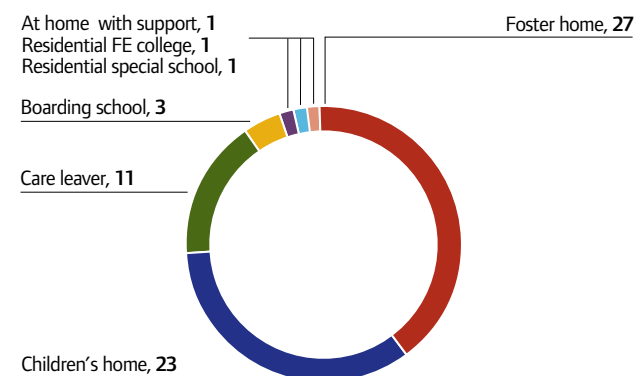
A total of 95 children took part in our discussion groups. We held 11 of these, seven at our consultation event and another four on visits to establishments.

Sixty-nine of the children who took part in discussion groups at our consultation event also gave us their views using electronic voting pads during our voting session. Many of those who attended the event also wrote their views on various complaints issues using the electronic tablets we had set up for them to use during breaks in the day's programme. Forty-four wrote to us this way about the best way to complain about schools, 37 about the best way to complain about care, and 40 wrote messages of advice to people with the job of looking into a complaint.

As well as all these, 25 other children responded to our invitation to send us accounts of their most recent experiences of making a complaint, using our secure survey website. We have copied 20 of these in full in this report. We did not include the other five because they did not really tell us enough about the complaints or what had happened, and because one was the second report on a complaint that had been made by two people.

Sixty-six of the children and young people who took part in our voting session told us their gender. Thirty-nine were girls and 27 were boys. Out of the 67 who told us their age, six were under 12, 19 were aged 12 to 14, 29 were 15 to 17, and 13 were over 18. Figure 1 shows where children who took part in our voting session came from.

**Figure 1: Where the children were living**



Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 67 children.





# Making a complaint

## What is a complaint?

Most of our groups said that making a complaint is a way of trying to get something sorted out, when something wrong has happened or when you disagree with something that is happening or are not happy about something. As one group summed it up, a complaint is **showing dissatisfaction with something or trying to improve something**. Another group said it could be about **something specific, services or surroundings**. It can also be about not being able to get something you want or need. Yet another group said that **a complaint can often be about a person rather than a thing or something particular that has happened**. This could be a complaint against somebody that really does need sorting out, or it could just be 'telling on somebody'.

A complaint can be about staff or carers not keeping to the rules for looking after you: 'When somebody where you live abandons the rules and makes new ones then you can make a complaint.' It may also need to be made if there is a breakdown in communications that might usually get things sorted out.

One group thought it was sometimes important that a complaint was made, otherwise something might be going wrong and nobody would be told about it, so nothing could be done about it. Another thought that the word 'complaint' was not seen as a very nice word; people don't like it.

'Complaining is doing something about it, moaning is just saying it for the sake of it'

There can also be complaints about things you buy, for example when they don't work properly – 'like when you buy a dodgy game'.

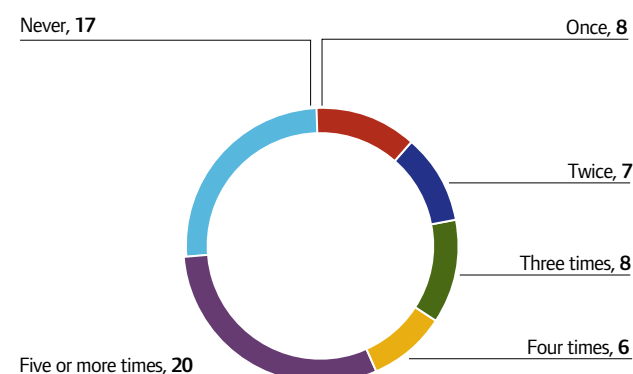
One group discussed the different levels of complaints – **complaints are not all the same and what happens to them should depend on how serious they are for the child**. There can be serious complaints about something not going right where the child lives, or smaller 'everyday' complaints. The same group said there was a big difference between complaining and moaning: 'Complaining is doing something about it, moaning is just saying it for the sake of it.'

The final point from one of our groups was that **making a complaint is a time when it is very important to tell the truth**.

## How many children had made complaints

Most of the children who took part in our consultation had made complaints recently. Others had not yet made complaints, but wanted to give us their views about complaints procedures they might use. Figure 2 shows how much experience the children in our voting session had of making complaints.

Figure 2: How often the children had made a complaint



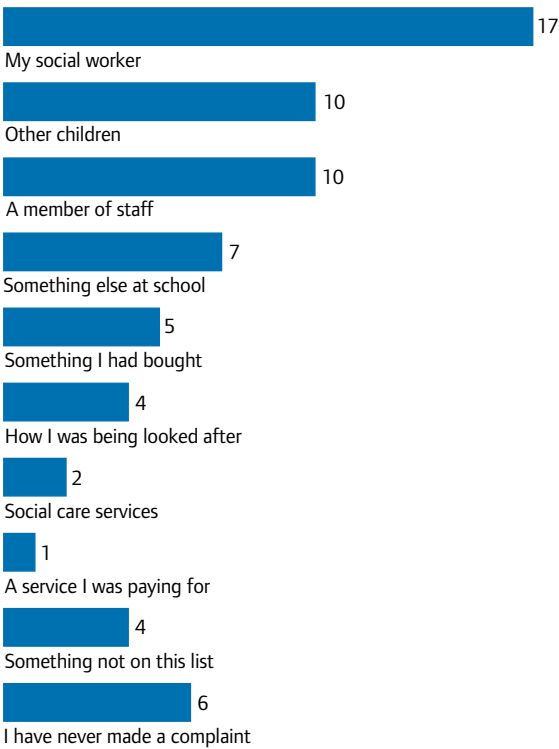
Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 66 children.

Figure 2 shows that three quarters of the children who took part in our voting session had made one or more complaint. Nearly a third had made five or more complaints. Added together, those in the voting session had experience of making over 100 complaints.

### What complaints are made about

We wanted to know what sorts of things children made complaints about. Figure 3 gives the answers from our voting session.

**Figure 3:** What children made complaints about



Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 66 children.



From answers in our voting session, **the three most common complaints that had been made by children we consulted were about social workers, other children and members of care staff.** A few children had made complaints about something they had bought, or a service they had paid for, rather than anything to do with care or school.

# Issues arising from making complaints

Children and young people in our discussion groups told us of some of the issues that had arisen from complaints they had made themselves.

Those in one group told us that they had not been told or given a procedure or system for making a complaint – but they had learned how to do it through actually doing it.

Another group, from a boarding school, gave us examples of complaints involving issues that had happened either in school or in the boarding house. The concern they had from these was that problems and complaints that came up in school time should not be carried over into the boarding house, and those that came up in the boarding house should not be carried over into school work or school time. **Unless the same issue applied in both places, like bullying or a safeguarding concern, problems in a boarding school should stay as either boarding or schooling problems and complaints.**

One group told us about **the problems of it taking a long time to sort out a complaint, and this having a big impact on a child's life while waiting for the result.** One young person told us that they had made a complaint about the accommodation they had been placed in, and the people considering their complaint had agreed with them and they were then moved to a better placement. But it had taken 28 days for the complaint to be considered, and for all of this

time, the young person had to wait and put up with accommodation that was very wrong for them.

Whatever the complaint, it matters that it is dealt with as quickly as possible. We heard in one group that a complaint about lack of hot water took about six months before the problem was fixed and the hot water supply worked again. In our 2005 consultation on complaints, we were told that once a child has made a complaint, it should be dealt with as quickly as it can be, but that different sorts of complaints may genuinely take different times to deal with properly. **It is important that complaints are got on with, but there does not need to be a set deadline for dealing with all complaints.**

A further issue from our groups was that **once you have made a complaint, what happens next may not be what you wanted or expected. You lose control of the situation once you have made your complaint.** It may take a very long time for something to happen – one example was that you simply never hear anything after your complaint, and just assume nothing ever happened. Members of one group told us that a complaint had been made to the head of their school about a teacher, but as far as they were concerned, nothing at all happened after that.

In other examples of complaints, what happened next did not sort the problem out, or was the wrong thing to happen from the child's point of view, or led to something happening that was bigger than the child making the complaint had wanted. An example was when a child complains to staff about another child. Staff may talk to the child, and tell the other child off, but not check afterwards whether things are now OK for the child who complained. Another example was complaining about an argument that had happened at school, and this then going wrong because you get told off for complaining about people, and staff tell your parents you had made a complaint even though you were trying to get things sorted out in school for yourself.

**'It's who you know,  
not what you know,  
like life really'**



One young person told us that they had complained about another young person, and this had resulted in the one they had complained about having to leave. This seemed too big a reaction to the original complaint, and the person in our group who had made the complaint thought it was not right and there should have been 'more of a system of warnings and punishments'.

We were given an example of where making a complaint, and how you make it, can simply make a bad situation worse. The example was not about care or education, but came from a sport. The young person said that during a football match the referee had decided to send them off. Whether that was right or wrong, standing and complaining about that decision had, they told us, simply led to a worse result, involving red cards and a ban.

Some in our groups told us that they thought **something unfair had happened when they made a complaint – either to themselves, or to someone else**. This could happen if someone got into more trouble than the child who had made the complaint thought they deserved. It could also happen if the child who had made the complaint actually got into trouble. One child in a group said that they wished they hadn't made a complaint because in their case, 'I told the truth and got grounded.'

Another issue from one of our discussion groups was that **sometimes a complaint leads to nothing until it is taken further up a complaints procedure**. One child said that they had been moved from a foster home to a children's home, but had stayed at the same school. Their journey to and from school was now a very long one involving three different buses each way, and they had complained about this and asked if transport could be provided to take them from the children's home to school. This complaint had been made for them by their advocate, but nothing happened to it until their advocate threatened to take it to the second formal stage of the council's complaints procedure – the problem was then sorted out. The same point was raised in another group,



where one person summed it up by saying, 'If they're not doing anything then you have to step it up.'

One group discussed ways of stepping things up over and above the complaints procedure, by **using the media**. One young person told us they 'went to the boss and threatened to go to the papers and I got what I wanted. If you say you'll go to the papers you get what you want'.

Almost the opposite had happened for some people – **things were often best sorted out informally without going up a complaints procedure**. Children and young people in one group told us they did not really need to complain and found that if something was going wrong for them, their social worker, key worker or aftercare worker would usually get the ball rolling to get the problem solved for them. Sometimes a new social worker or a new teacher can be better than the old one at listening and taking action on a young person's concerns. Some are better at doing this than others.

Some children had learned that **being involved in a young people's group such as the Children in Care Council or with a voluntary organisation got your own personal complaints sorted out quickly for you**. One person said that complaints were sorted out more easily if you knew people in high places. Another commented, 'It's who you know, not what you know, like life really.'

One group discussed the problem of **whether getting an apology after a complaint was a good response or not**. In one example, a young person had attended a conference for both adults and young people in London. A speaker had kept asking the adults questions but ignoring the children. The young person, and others, had challenged her for this, and were told that the speaker had not seen the young people wanting to speak. They had made a complaint and received an apology – but 'she kind of apologised but we don't think she meant it'.

Some children were concerned that a complaint can backfire on the complainant. They gave an example of where they had told the truth about a situation but had not been believed, and not only had this got them a bad name, but as a result they had been punished by being grounded.

We heard in our groups that some sorts of complaint are especially difficult for children to make. **Making a complaint about your foster carers is particularly difficult**. You are afraid that if you do, it will change the way they treat you afterwards. You can also be

frightened that if you do speak up, you will simply get moved somewhere else, rather than the problem being sorted out in a foster home where you are basically safe and happy. It is often better to keep quiet.

Making a complaint about your social worker can also be difficult. Often, although your complaint is about your social worker, **you feel you are being unfair in complaining, because it isn't always your social worker's fault – they are 'just following orders'**.

A final issue raised in our groups was about how important confidentiality can be when a complaint has been made. Children were concerned that **all too often, the person a child makes a complaint about gets immediately told about the complaint, which can make it very difficult for the child who is still being looked after or supported by them, and puts children off making complaints about how staff are treating them**.

The group gave us an example of how some young people in a home had made a complaint to senior staff about their aftercare worker. This had resulted in the aftercare worker they had complained about turning up at their home to give them a complaints leaflet. She had obviously been told about the complaint rather than the senior staff looking into it for themselves. By involving the worker the young people were complaining about, managers had stopped the complaint from getting sorted out, had put the young people in a very difficult position for raising concerns about someone who was still working with them, had made them very angry, and had put them off making any complaints in the future.

A child in a different group told us what had happened when they had talked with their social worker about making a complaint and their confidentiality had been broken. They had first heard that they were going to be moved to a different placement when they saw a letter about it at school, from their headteacher to their form teacher, that had just been left lying around. The child wanted to complain about this, but their social worker told them not to bother complaining as it would not make any difference.

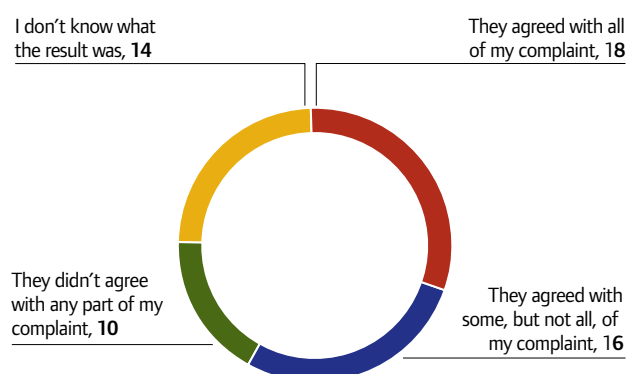
'She kind of apologised but we don't think she meant it'



# What happens after complaints are made

We asked children in both our voting session and in our discussion groups to tell us the results of making a complaint. The answers from the voting session are set out in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: The results of complaining**



Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 58 children.

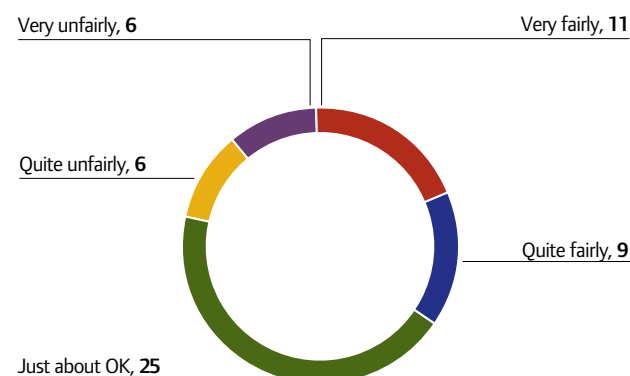
Many children's complaints are agreed with. **Nearly a third of the children told us their last complaint had been totally agreed with. Overall, well over half the children said that their last complaint was agreed with either totally or in part.** Only one in six children told us their last complaint had been completely rejected.

However, 14 children, about a quarter of those who answered this question in our voting session, said that they did not know the result of the last complaint they had made. In our discussion groups, some children told us they didn't believe that professionals actually read all the complaints they received from children and young people.

We checked whether any particular sorts of complaint had a very different result, but being agreed with totally or in part was still the most common result of complaints about social care services, school, the way children are being looked after, and about something a child has bought.

Whatever the result of making a complaint, and even if it is not agreed with, we think it is important that complaints procedures are seen to be fair, and that complaints are properly looked into. So we asked the children in our voting session to tell us whether they thought their own complaints had been fairly dealt with, whatever the result had been. Their verdict is shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: How fairly complaints are dealt with**



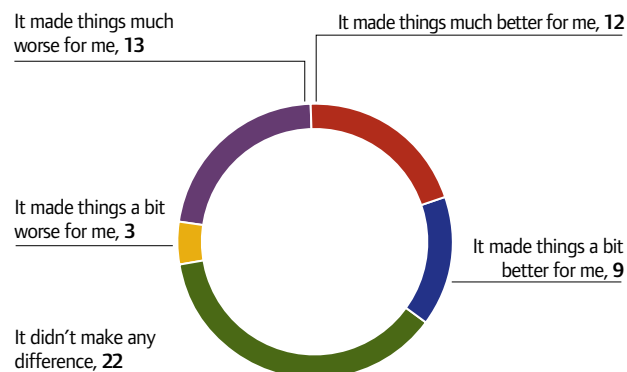
Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 57 children.

In our voting session, **just over a third of the children said their last complaint had been dealt with very fairly or quite fairly, but one in five said it had been dealt with very unfairly or quite unfairly.** All the rest rated it as 'just about OK' for fairness.

As well as whether a complaint is dealt with fairly, and whether it is or is not agreed with, we think it is important to know whether making a complaint made matters better or worse for the child who complained. We put this question in our voting session, and the answers are given in Figure 6.



**Figure 6: The effect of making a complaint**



Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 59 children.

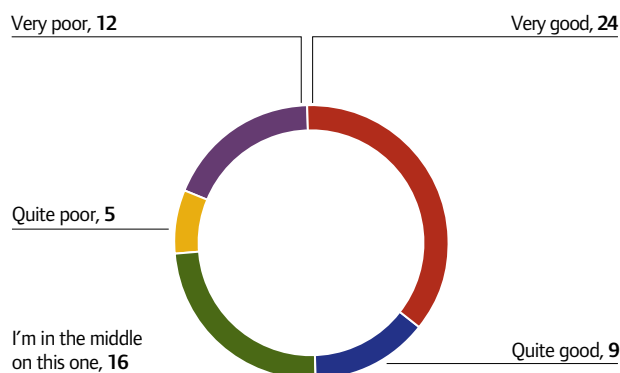
The figure shows a wide range of experiences of whether making a complaint makes things better or worse for a child. **Just over a third said that the last complaint they made had made things either a bit better or much better for them. But on the other hand over a quarter said that it had made things either a bit worse or much worse for them.** The rest said it hadn't made any difference.

In these children's experience, **making a complaint was likely to make a difference, but was only slightly more likely to make things better than worse.**

Finally in this section, we asked children to give us their views on how good making a complaint is at getting a problem sorted out. Their views on this from the voting session are set out in Figure 7.

**Exactly half the children we consulted thought that making a complaint is a quite good or very good way of getting a problem sorted out. A quarter thought that making a complaint was quite poor or very poor at getting a problem sorted out.**

**Figure 7: How good making a complaint is at getting a problem sorted out**



Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 66 children.

### What should happen if a complaint doesn't work?

In our groups we heard that if a complaint doesn't get things sorted out, then a possible next step is to take the problem up to someone in a higher position. Some told us they would talk with their social worker, or with their friends, about what they could do next. Someone suggested that if the problem was a very serious one, they might need to go to the police about it if making a complaint didn't work. In one group, people said that they could perhaps go to a voluntary organisation that helps children in care. Those in another group said that they had found taking a problem to the Children's Rights Officer in their local authority had helped get things sorted out for them. One group suggested that the next step could be to write to the government so they would be aware of what was happening or was not getting sorted out for children.

We heard from our groups that **if making a complaint does not work in getting something serious sorted out, then children might take things into their own hands and do something dramatic to change things for themselves.**

One child told us that in their experience, **making a complaint about something before it had become very serious usually didn't work – so 'you have to make the problem worse before they'll deal with it'.** A child in a different group made a similar point, saying that complaints about small problems do need to be dealt with there and then to stop problems snowballing: 'The longer you leave a small problem, the bigger it gets.'

The most usual dramatic action we heard about was **the child running away if making a complaint hadn't sorted things out.** This could happen over a big enough problem even though the child might be very well aware that they would be getting into danger by running away.

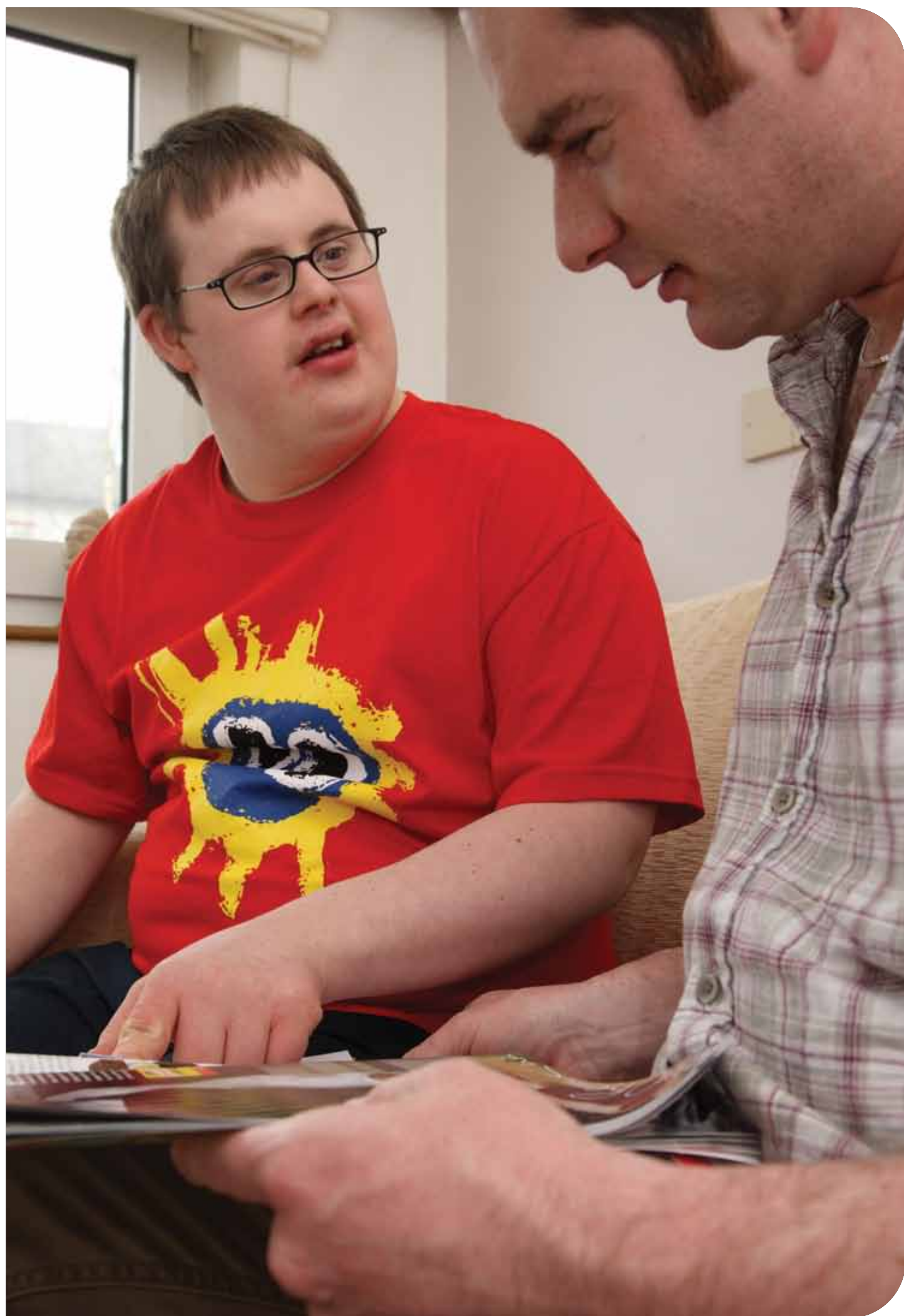
One child told us that after they were told on two different occasions that something they had made a complaint about was 'not true' and was therefore not going to be looked into any further, they had run away because they could not think of anything else they could do.

Another child told us that they had made a complaint about their placement, which had not changed anything. They had then run away, and that had sorted the problem out, because they were then moved straight away to another placement, which is what they had asked to happen in the first place.

Yet another child told us how they had had to take things into their own hands to try to get moved from a placement they couldn't cope with. The child was in a foster home, and had persuaded their foster brother to steal something and to blame them, so that they would be moved to a different foster home. That had not worked and so they had run away. They had slept under a slide in a children's playground and then managed to find their way to a relative's house. The group they were in thought that as many as three quarters of the times children run away from care could be stopped if there were good complaints systems to sort children's problems out quickly. They told us that **a bad complaints system leads to running away:** 'If things were all good, then you wouldn't run away.'

'The longer you leave a problem the bigger it gets'

'You have to make the problem worse before they'll deal with it'



# When adults complain on behalf of a child

We know from consultations in the past that although children can and do make complaints for themselves, complaints are often made by adults about services for children. This might be fully on behalf of the child, or the adult might be saying something different from what the child wishes or feels about the situation. For this report, we asked children in our voting session how often adults had made complaints on their behalf, and we also talked about this in our discussion groups.

Sixty-seven children and young people answered the question about this in our voting session. **Over a third of the children (25 out of the 67) said that at some time an adult had made a complaint on their behalf. Six of those 25 (one in four) said that they had not wanted the adult to make the complaint.** In their voting, children also told us that they did not always know whether or not an adult had made a complaint about the services or care they were getting. **Fourteen out of the 67, that is one in five, did not know whether or not an adult had made a complaint on their behalf.**

People in our discussion groups made points both for and against the idea of adults making complaints on behalf of children. **Having an adult to make a complaint on the child's behalf may be necessary if the child doesn't really have a voice of their own, or if they don't have enough confidence to speak out, or are simply frightened to make a complaint:** 'It's OK if children aren't able and can't get their words out, but can tell the adult what they want and they

can speak for them.' It can also help that the adult can explain things the child mightn't understand. Some told us that **an adult may have to make a complaint on behalf of a child if the problem is about safeguarding or abuse of the child.** One young person gave us an example of how they had been assaulted in one placement and hadn't made a complaint about that, but an adult who knew about it had made the complaint after discussing this with the young person first. The young person thought that was absolutely the right thing for them to do.

One discussion group told us how **an adult making a complaint is likely to be more effective than a child making the same complaint, because professionals always listen to adults more than children.** For example, in a school, teachers will always listen more to parents than children: 'They respect parents more.'

One group thought that one thing an adult could do better than the child in making a complaint is to put everything into social work language: 'Child may be too young to put things in words that a social worker would understand.'

On the other hand, **it is important that the adult actually gets all the facts right,** and they don't always. One group said that adults may change the story, especially if the complaint affects them. If an adult is going to make a complaint on behalf of a child, it is important that they talk with the child first to make sure that they are saying what the child wants them to say. One child told us how an adult had made a complaint about something the child said didn't happen, because the adult didn't believe what the child had said. Another parent had told the child's foster carer that the child was being chased. The child had said that they weren't being chased, but was not believed and a complaint was made. This had caused a lot of trouble for the child concerned.

**'It's OK if children aren't able and can't get their words out, but can tell the adult what they want and they can speak for them'**





Sometimes, we were told, **an adult who decides to speak on behalf of a child can break the confidentiality of private things in the child's life.**

There are also times when a child may want an adult to speak on their behalf – but the child needs to be protected because they too were doing something

wrong. In one example, a child was attacked in the street, but didn't want to tell their carer because they were somewhere they shouldn't have been at the time. They had talked this over with their Independent Visitor, rather than with their carer, and their Independent Visitor had helped them with this and made the complaint on their behalf.

In one group, there was a clear view that young people do need to make their own complaints rather than relying on a parent or other adult to complain on their behalf, so that they can learn to sort problems out for themselves. Parents and carers won't always be there to sort problems or complaints out.

We heard a clear view that **if an adult is going to make a complaint on behalf of a child, they should always ask the child first.**

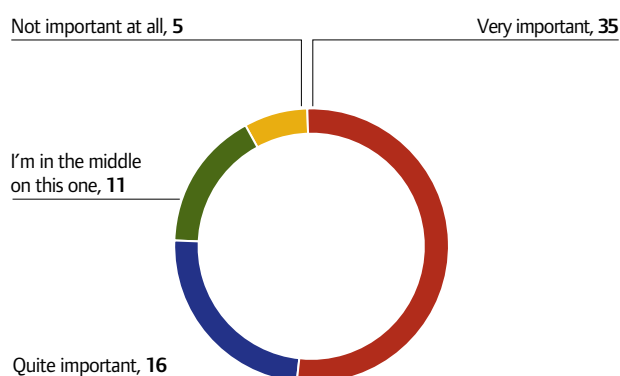
**'Child may be too young to put things in words that a social worker would understand'**

# Using official procedures

Many people who are responsible for policies and services for children say how important it is that children should have a way to make a complaint if they feel they need to. Out of 65 children answering a question about this in the voting session, 58 (**nine out of 10**) told us they did know how to make a **complaint** about how they are being looked after.

We wanted to know from the children we consulted how important it was to them to be able to make a complaint if they needed to. The views of those who took part in our voting session are given in Figure 8.

**Figure 8:** How important it is to have a way of making a complaint



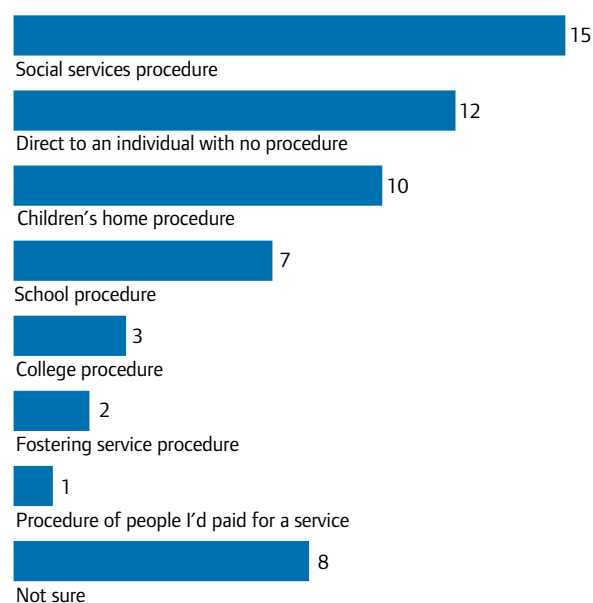
Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 67 children. No child gave the answer 'not really important'.

The large majority of the children we asked said that it is important to them to have a way of making a complaint. **Three quarters of the children said that it was very important, or quite important, to have a way of making a complaint.** Only five children said it was not important.

Having an official complaints 'procedure' is however not the only way to make a complaint. Not all the children we asked in our voting session had used any set complaints procedure the last time they had made a complaint. As Figure 9 shows, **one in five of those children who had made a complaint had made their last complaint to an individual they thought could deal with it for them, without using any sort of procedure.**

For those who did use set procedures, the official complaints procedure most commonly used by the children who came to our voting session was the social care services procedure, followed by the procedure of a children's home, and then by the procedure of a school.

**Figure 9:** The complaints procedures used



Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 58 children.

## Getting things sorted out without making a complaint

One of our groups thought that making a complaint is not generally a good way of getting a problem sorted out. This was particularly true if you were younger, when you couldn't really cope with filling in complicated complaints forms. The group thought that it was important that every child in care should have an Independent Visitor to talk things through with if they were worried about something, and to help them make a complaint if that was needed. They thought that **most younger children would need an adult to help them fill in a complaints form.** The answer wasn't just to have simple complaints forms for younger children; **forms with smiley and sad faces on them were no good for a child to explain properly how something had gone wrong for them.**

One of the main things children told us would help in getting a problem sorted out was **knowing (or finding out) the right person to go to with the problem**. Some said the social worker was usually the right person, but sometimes you needed to go to someone else who would make sure the social worker took action. One child told us they had gone to their year head at school because their social worker was not sorting something out, and the year head had got on to the social worker. This had worked. Someone else had discovered that they could get things sorted if they went to their social worker's boss, rather than their social worker. Some in one group thought that if possible, it was usually best to confront people looking after you and tell them directly how you wanted them to treat you.

Again, **some people had found their Independent Visitors to be good people to raise things on their behalf** in order to get them sorted out, and it was good that they could discuss things fully and in confidence with their Independent Visitor first.

Two of the discussion groups told us that they had found **counsellors** good people to talk things over with – though as one person put it, often ‘they are just there to listen and can’t do anything’.

One group told us that in their experience, the problem with complaints procedures was that **you had to send in your complaint in writing, but talking to someone face to face was usually a better way to get a problem sorted out**.

‘There should be a better way, because if you don’t want to talk to your carer...’



Another problem we were told is that many **complaints procedures expect a child to tell their carer first about any problems – but any complaints are actually likely to be about their carers, so this stops them being able to make a complaint**. As one person said, ‘There should be a better way, because if you don’t want to talk to your carer...’ They thought that there should be a website for young people to use if they had a complaint they couldn’t talk about to their carer or social worker.

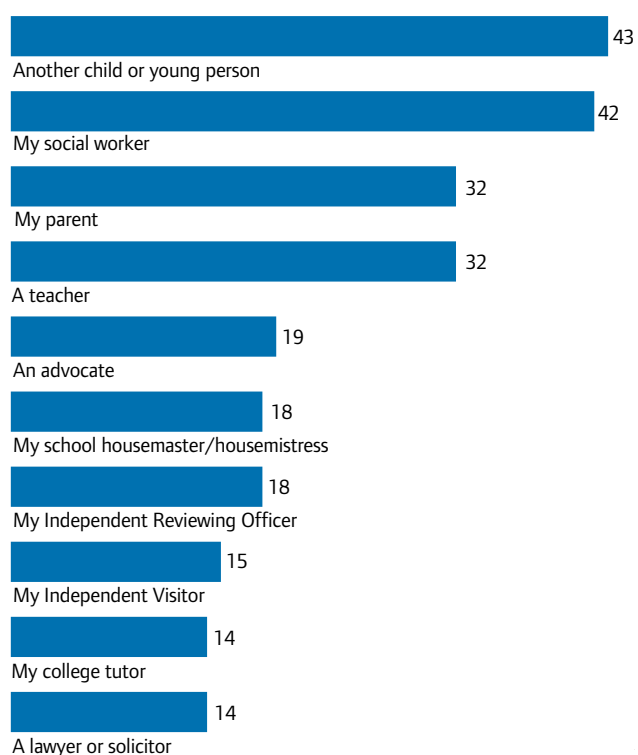
From our groups we heard that a major way of working out how to get something sorted out was **talking about it with your friends**. There is always a major decision to be made if there is a problem: ‘Telling someone or not – it’s like half and half, depends on the situation.’ A child or young person may decide, perhaps after talking with their friends, that it is best not to tell anyone about a problem they are having.

# Discussion before making a complaint

We have heard from children in the past that very often a child or young person will want to talk to someone else about a problem before deciding whether to make a complaint about it. They will ask for their advice about it, and check out whether someone else thinks things are bad enough to make a complaint about.

Figure 10 shows the people that children in our voting group said they would talk to about something before deciding whether or not to make a complaint.

**Figure 10: Who children talk to about making a complaint**

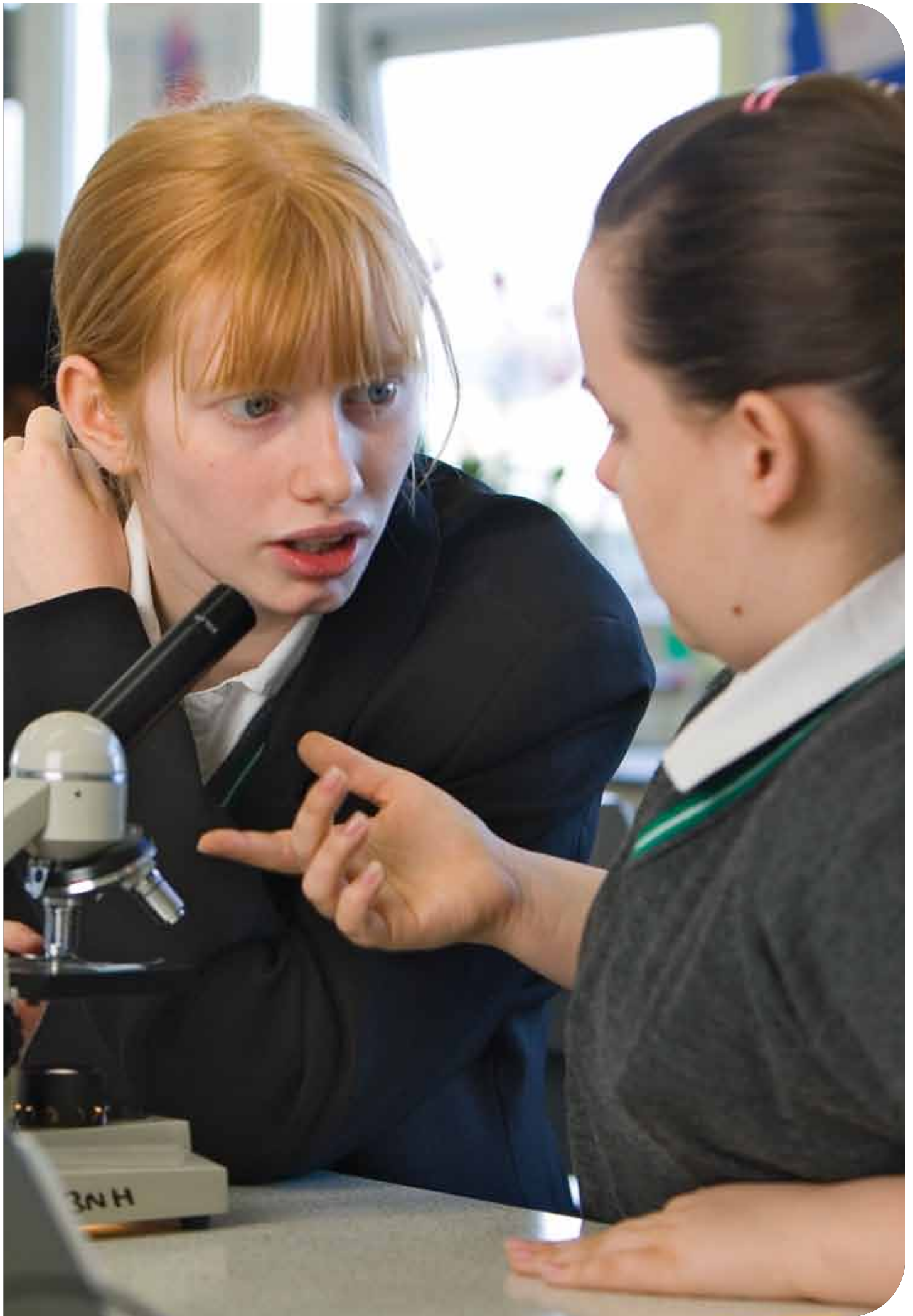


Figures are the numbers of children. Children could make more than one response.

As Figure 10 shows, **children we consulted were most likely to talk to another child or young person to check things out before deciding whether or not to make a complaint. For children in care or getting help from social care services, their social worker was the most likely person to talk to about a possible complaint.** Parents and teachers were the next most likely.







# Using an advocate

In our discussion groups and in the voting session, we asked children about their experiences of having the help and support of an advocate when they made a complaint.

At the voting session, **out of 55 children who had made a complaint, 21 (over a third) had been helped by an advocate when they made their last complaint.**

**However, 16 (over a quarter) told us they didn't know what an advocate was.**

We asked those who had been helped by an advocate what sort of help the advocate had given them with their complaint. **The top two sorts of help from an advocate were making sure their complaint got dealt with properly, and saying what the child wanted them to say to people. The next two most common sorts of help were the advocate giving the child advice, and explaining things to the child.** In our discussion groups we heard how advocates could make sure that a complaint is being dealt with and that it 'doesn't fall under files' and stop.

Our discussion groups were very clear that **advocates need to be very good listeners.** Not only should they listen to the child's point of view, but **it is important that advocates should 'not make rules for you' and decide what they think is best for you:** 'They should say what the kid actually says, not what they interpret them to mean.' One child said that an advocate should not be a 'know it all'.

Our groups talked more about their experience of having the help of an advocate, and how this was different from an adult making a complaint on behalf of a child. The main benefit of having an advocate was definitely that the advocate could listen to the child and make sure the child's own views came across. The job is to represent the child's views, not to make the complaint in their place.

An advocate could also help a child to make a complaint without the child having to write everything down, which, we had already heard, is a problem for some children, especially very young ones.

The rule our groups most often put forward for advocates was that **the advocate must have the child's permission for whatever they do or say for the child.**

Another rule was that **the child should be able to say no to any particular advocate that is found for them.** For example, the child may want to say no if they think the advocate knows the staff involved in the complaint too well. However, it is sometimes important for the advocate to be someone who does know the child. Although some children liked having an advocate who didn't already know them, and could just deal with the complaint itself without knowing lots of other things, some thought that it didn't help at all to have a complete stranger as an advocate.

The key rule from one group was that **advocates must keep the child's information confidential,** unless it is a safeguarding issue that has to be passed on, or the child gives permission for information about them to be passed on.

One group told us that a good advocate empowers and supports the child they are helping, understands the complaints procedure and knows what is happening with the child's complaint, explains this to the child and keeps them up to date with how their complaint is going, offers the child choices, is fully trustworthy for the child, is available when the child wants to talk to them, and is good at keeping to deadlines.

If a complaint was made in a school, children in one of our groups told us that **teachers were often good advocates, but sometimes it was important for the child to be able to have an advocate from outside the school altogether.**

One child told us that they had made a complaint to an Ofsted inspector, hoping they would deal with it, but 'when they came out they never did anything'.



# Using a lawyer

In the voting session, **13 children out of 69 (just under one in five) told us they had been helped by a lawyer (or solicitor) in making a complaint.**

We heard more about this in our discussion groups, though some children quite reasonably did not want to talk about times when they had needed a lawyer. One example we were given was when a children's home was being closed. Children had complained before the closure, but it had still closed. They had gone to a solicitor after the closure, and this had been very helpful, not over the closure itself, but in getting things sorted out for some children's relocation to different placements.

Other examples where a lawyer had helped were where a young person had made a complaint against their social worker, and another where their social worker was not getting something sorted out for them: 'Sent a social worker but they refused to get involved and so I got a solicitor involved and they changed my social worker and local authority.' Another young person told us how they had helped a family member to get money from the local authority for being their carer: 'I went to a lawyer to get it sorted out (and they did!) because social services were refusing to give my relative any money to help look after me.'

**'I went to a lawyer  
to get it sorted out  
(and they did!).'**

Sometimes **getting a lawyer was something a young person had done when they were very frustrated with nothing being sorted out for them:**

'I kicked off about a situation because they weren't doing anything about it, so got a lawyer involved'; 'I wouldn't go for an advocate. I walked into an office and asked to see a solicitor.'

Three final views on having the help of a lawyer were that lawyers can fight your side for you, they can fight for you in a court, and they are good at getting you out of trouble with the police.

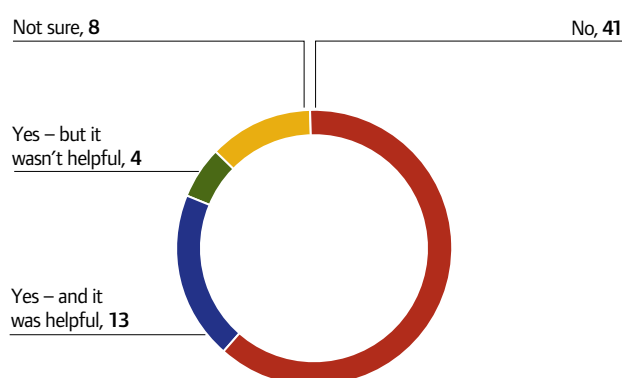




# Using the Children's Rights Director

As all the children we consulted knew about the Office of the Children's Rights Director, and the topic of our consultation was making complaints, we took the opportunity to ask those in our voting group whether they had ever asked for our help with a problem. Figure 11 shows their answers.

**Figure 11: Involving the Office of the Children's Rights Director**



Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 66 children.

**A quarter of the children in our voting session told us they had asked for help from the Office of the Children's Rights Director with a problem in the past. Eight weren't sure whether they had been helped by us or by someone else. Three quarters of those who had asked for our help said they thought that it had been helpful – a quarter said that it hadn't been helpful.**

Children and young people in care, getting support from children's social care services, or living away from home in boarding schools or colleges, can all ask the Office of the Children's Rights Director for advice and help about their rights. Mostly, children and young people call us themselves on our telephone helpline, but adults can call or email on their behalf too – though we always try to talk straight away to the children themselves if an adult calls on their behalf, to check what their own views and worries are.

In the year from April 2011 to March 2012, we had 450 calls for advice and help. Some of these were from professionals asking for our advice on children's rights, but 380 of the calls were for advice and help for a particular child or young person. In 72% of these, the call came from the children or young people themselves.

When a child calls us, we can advise them about their rights – for example, what the law says about things like being moved from one placement or another, or about what a young person is entitled to on leaving care. We often advise children on how to make a complaint, and if they need it, we can help them get an advocate to help them to make a complaint, or a lawyer to help them sort things out. If the problem is something the child's Independent Reviewing Officer can sort out, then we may get in touch with them for the child.

In some cases we write personally to the Director of Children's Services for the authority which is looking after the child to ask the Director to review the child's case, to advise them on how we see the child's rights, and to ask them to tell us the results of their review. Very often, these reviews result in a decision being changed for the child, though sometimes we are told some good reasons for what has happened that the child may not know about yet.

**Children's calls to us for advice and help are very often about things that a child or young person could well make a complaint about. The most common problem children call us about is being moved from one placement to another.** In these cases, the child often tells us that as far as they know, they are doing well in the placement where they are, that their care plan was for them to stay where they are, that they do not want to move, that they were not asked for their wishes or feelings before it was decided they had to move, and that it looks as if they are being moved because of reasons that are not to do with their best interests – like saving money, because their placement had only been agreed for a period of time, or because a panel which wasn't their care review meeting has decided it is time for their placement to end.

Here are some quotes from children who called us for advice and help when they had been told they were being moved.

'I don't want to leave here. I'm settled'

'I think it's about money. My IFA [Independent Fostering Agency] is more expensive than the LA, and they may not have to pay for my taxis as well'

'I've been told I've got to move from here but no one has asked me what I want or need. I don't know where I'm going'

'My social worker sent an email to the staff to tell me about being moved. She then came last Monday to ask me what I thought. She'd already made the decision'

'No one's asked me what I want to do. I was just told'

'I like it here. I've made new friends. I don't want to move no more. I've lost all my old friends. I didn't even say goodbye to them'

'I just want to stay here. I am happy here'

Our last complete year's figures, between April 2011 and March 2012, show that we were called about 92 different placement moves that the children thought should not be happening. This was about a quarter (24%) of all the different problems children (or adults on their behalf) called us about. In 56 of these cases, we gave advice on how to challenge or complain about changing placements. In 35 of these cases we

wrote to the Director of Children's Services asking for things to be reviewed for the child. This led to the placement move being stopped in 24 cases (over two thirds of these cases), and the Director explaining further reasons for the move to us in 10 cases (the other one case was still being reviewed when we added our figures up).

One piece of advice we very regularly give to both children and professionals is something that is often not known about – by either children or professionals. It is that whenever a complaint is made by (or on behalf of) a child, and the complaint is about something which hasn't happened yet, **things should usually be 'frozen' as they are until the complaint has been looked into.** This is set out in the government's guidance *Getting the best from complaints*, which says that if a complaint is made about a decision to do with changing a care plan, a placement or a service a child is getting, the council's complaints staff and service managers should discuss 'freezing' the decision, and consider not carrying it out until after the complaint has been considered. **The government guidance says they should *usually* decide to freeze the decision and not carry it out, *unless* doing that would be a major risk to the child's well-being.** It says that if there is any disagreement about freezing a decision like this, the council's Director should be involved.

This means, for example, that if a child complains about moving placements, the move should be stopped and they should stay where they are if at all possible (unless there is some safeguarding risk to them where they are) while the complaint is being considered.

The idea of freezing a decision when a complaint was made about it had been discussed by children in our first consultation on complaints systems back in 2005 (*Getting the best from complaints: the children's view*). We reported then that some children thought that decisions should be stopped if you complained about them, until the complaint was sorted out. This was especially important if the complaint was about being moved out of your placement. There would be little

point in investigating a complaint like that if making the complaint did not stop the move happening until the complaint was looked into, 'because after the complaint has been investigated it might be too late, you might already have moved'. Other children told us for that report that it was important to decide in each individual case whether it was right to freeze a change of placement, or whether this would actually leave the child in a placement they had complained about or which would put them at risk. It depends, but freezing the decision should always be looked at.

**It would be good if the government could consider making the guidance even stronger, and better known, that decisions like placement moves should usually be 'frozen' while a complaint is being considered.**

One of the things that children have often told us in our past consultations is how important it is to have somebody they can go to if they believe their rights are not being met in a way that affects their lives, or they do not think they are getting things they are entitled to by law. We have just seen how children call the Office of the Children's Rights Director about such things, and how we try to advise the child and challenge what is happening for them if necessary.



However, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) are people appointed by local authorities to do this sort of thing for each child in care. Their job is to check that the council is doing all it should be doing for the child while they are in care, to go to all the child's care reviews and make sure they are done properly, to check on the child's care plan, and to make sure the council takes proper notice of the child's wishes and feelings.

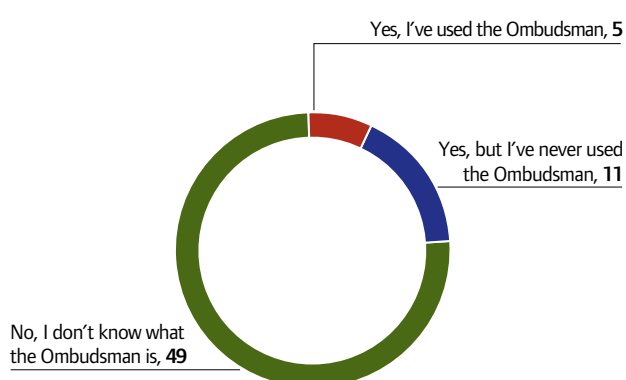
When we wrote our report *Children on Independent Reviewing Officers* last year, we reported that 71% of the children in care we had asked told us that some or all children in care need someone other than their social worker to do the job of the IRO – though we also heard that children mainly saw IROs as the people who chair their review meetings, and one in eight of the children did not know whether or not they had an IRO. For that same report, children had told us the main things they wanted their IROs to do for them (without any suggestions from us). The top five things they wanted from their IROs were: to make sure children are looked after properly, to be in charge of review meetings, to make sure children's wishes and feelings are heard and taken into account when decisions are made about their lives, to make sure everyone does what they should for the child, and to listen to the child.

**We wonder whether the time has come to make IROs have stronger powers in the law to make challenges for children whenever they think a child is not getting their rights met or getting what they are entitled to – including over things like placement moves.**

# Using the Ombudsman

The Ombudsman is a person who leads an organisation that can investigate complaints about services from local councils to see if any decision has been made in the right way. We asked children in our voting group whether or not they had heard of the Ombudsman, and whether they had ever gone to the Ombudsman about anything. Figure 12 sets out their answers.

**Figure 12:** Whether children know about the Ombudsman



Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 65 children.

In our voting group, **just under a quarter of the children knew what the Ombudsman was**, and five children had actually gone to the Ombudsman with a complaint. Three quarters of the children discussing complaints with us said they didn't know what the Ombudsman is.

We checked with the Ombudsman's office and they told us that the number of complaints they get directly from children or young people is extremely small, around two or three complaints per year in each of their three offices. However, they do get very many complaints from adults about education or care services to children. **Complaints by adults on behalf of children make up about one in five of all complaints made to the Ombudsman.** These complaints are often about big injustices and so they lead to about a third of all the public reports the Ombudsman issues.



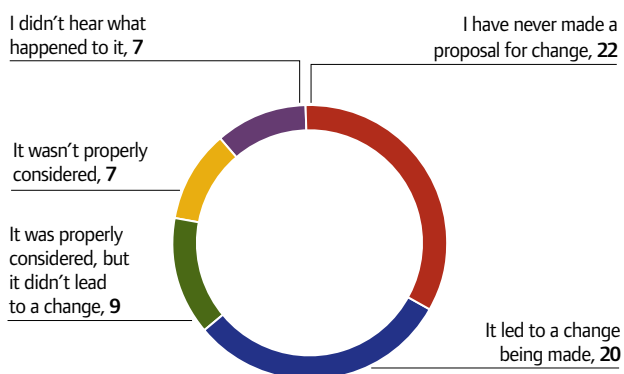




# When children propose changes

What is usually called the 'complaints procedure' for social care services under the Children Act 1989 is in fact not only for complaints, but for suggestions as well. The law says that it is actually a procedure for 'representations (including any complaint)'. This means that children can use the procedure to put forward proposals to improve things that they want their social care authority to consider. We asked children in both our voting session and our discussion groups whether they had ever put forward any proposals for change that weren't complaints. We also asked what had happened to their proposals. Figure 13 gives the answers from our voting session.

**Figure 13:** What happens to children's proposals for change



Figures are the numbers of children. Based on responses from 65 children.

**Forty-three children in our voting session told us they had put forward a proposal for change. That is two thirds of all the children and young people who came to the session. Nearly half of those who had made a proposal for change told us it led to a change being made, and one in five said their proposal had been properly considered, but had not led to a change. Around one in six thought their proposal hadn't been properly considered, and a similar number told us they had never heard what had happened to their proposal.**

**Overall, making a proposal for change was, according to the children in our voting session, slightly more effective than making a complaint at producing the change they wanted.** Nearly half the positive proposals made led to a change happening, but we have already learned from the same group of children that just over a third of their complaints had led to things getting better, with over a quarter saying making a complaint had made things worse for them.

Some examples of suggestions made by people in our group discussions were: ways a children's home could be made more like a real home (this had led to children being able to choose colours for their carpets and walls), meeting with local authority councillors to put proposals for an increase in the care leaving grant, a child asking to be considered for Special Guardianship instead of being a foster child (which is now being considered for them), successfully using a council questionnaire to propose that the council should provide storage areas for children in care so that they didn't end up with their possessions being stored somewhere in black bags when they moved placements, and children providing a folder with advice for other children in care on how to make suggestions and raise issues.





# Twenty complaints

So far in this report, we have put together what children and young people told us in answer to questions we asked them. For the next section of the report, we have set out what children and young people told us about complaints they had actually made. We gave them some basic headings to use to tell us about the last complaints they had made, what they were about and what happened when they complained.

The 20 summaries below are in the words of the child or young person who made each complaint, with no comments from us, and (apart from taking out words that would identify people or places) there is nothing added and nothing taken away.

## From a 15-year-old at a boarding school

**What was your last complaint about?**

The showers.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I talked to the girls in my room and we all agreed the showers were a bit grotty.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

My head of house.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Because all the complaints go to them then they all go to the meetings.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

They spoke to us in more detail and then they said they would do something about it.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

By the head of house saying that my point went through and it was noticed and dealt upon.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

The showers were replastered and made to look better than they were previously.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Completely satisfied.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

That the showers were better than before.

**What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

That the water went cold sometimes.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

No.

## From a child in a foster home (no age given)

**What was your last complaint about?**

The taxi driver that I used to have to take me to school.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

Friends at school.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Social worker.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

My social worker is in charge of these things for me.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

Social care.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

They told me they were looking into it.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

My foster carers take me to school now.



**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Completely satisfied.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

Yes, not having a taxi any more.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

Getting the situation sorted.

### From a 19-year-old care leaver

**What was your last complaint about?**

My aftercare worker breaking confidentiality.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I spoke to my health visitor, my mentor and the boss of aftercare.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Manager of aftercare.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Because she was at a care meeting and I was talking about it to the other young people.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

I'm not sure.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

My aftercare worker turned up at my door.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

Me and my aftercare worker have agreed she can talk to others involved with me as long as I give her permission first.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Not very satisfied.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

Yes. My worker now consults me if she has any worries.

**What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

They sent my aftercare worker to my door.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

They should have had a meeting with a manager or something first to talk it through.

### From an 18-year-old care leaver

**What was your last complaint about?**

I complained about my local authority & my provider. I was placed into a flat (semi-independent) that wasn't checked as it had two broken windows, faulty fridge & freezer & heater & hot water access & a washing machine. I wrote more but there is no space for it.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I tried telling my social worker and provider but they ignored me which is why I made the complaint.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

I used the council's complaint procedure as my social worker wasn't doing anything with my complaints so I decided to write them together in one document.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Because I had faith that my council would deal with my complaint just like with any other complaint from their residents, but my complaint was made over two months ago and till today I have not received a reply to my complaint. So I am very disappointed!

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

Yes.

**How exactly did your advocate help you?**

I did it myself but gave it to my advocate to read over it before I sent it to the complaint team.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

The manager of my social worker came to me without my complaint and I had to repeat it to him & after that he assured me that he would deal with it but I never heard from him since. Last Friday he said he would respond to my complaint but he hasn't.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

I have not been told because they have not dealt with it.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

I don't know, as mentioned previously.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Not at all satisfied.

**Do you have anything more to say about how satisfied you were with the outcome of your complaint?**

I would like my local authority to not discriminate me because I'm a looked after child but follow their complaint procedure and resolve my complaint. This process has been very frustrating and offputting and very time and energy consuming.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

No.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

I got to put my views and feelings about the people that are supposed to care for me written down, which is an evidence for the distress and depression I am in now as a result of these events.

**What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

Not getting my complaint resolved and getting the feeling that I am not a valued member of the community as my council ignores their own complaint procedure in my case.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

My local authority should follow their own complaint procedure in dealing with complaints regardless of whether it comes from adults or young people. They should not discriminate and ignore me because I'm a young person.

**From a 14-year-old in a children's home****What was your last complaint about?**

Moving to different care home.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

An advocate, house manager.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Social worker and advocate.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Advocate.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

Yes.

**How exactly did your advocate help you?**

She rang the social worker and told her my side of the story and why it would have been a bad idea.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

They sent me a letter and discussed this in a meeting.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

They wrote a letter to me and rang me about this.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

They didn't move me to the different care home and let me stay for an extra six months and this will be discussed on my behaviour on my next review meeting.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Completely satisfied.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

I got to stay for longer and they listened.

**What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

Don't know.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

The social worker should have discussed what was going to happen with me instead of deciding this herself.



### From an 11-year-old in a boarding school

**What was your last complaint about?**

People in my class.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

The people in my class.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Teacher.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

I trust them.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

Nothing.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

Not at all.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

Nothing.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Not at all satisfied.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

No.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

So people can hear you out!

**What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

That you might get told off.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

No.

### From a 15-year-old in a foster home

**What was your last complaint about?**

My social worker forgetting to inform me about my contact leading to me missing my contact.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I discussed it with my carer and my young people's board and I had found I wasn't the only one with this problem.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Reviewing Officer.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Because I know I can trust this person and they will do something about it rather than say they will and won't.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

I was visited by my social worker and she discussed the matter with me.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

By my social worker coming out to see me and talking to me.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

I got everything sorted and have got things rearranged.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Somewhat satisfied.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

No.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

I got things sorted instead of stressing about them.

**What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

I felt guilty for grassing the person up who the complaint was about.



**Should anything have been done differently?**

Nope.

**From a 14-year-old in a foster home**

**What was your last complaint about?**

My social worker.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I had it with my sister and we both decided on making a complaint.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Carer and family.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

I decided to do it to them because they understand why.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

Yes.

**How exactly did your advocate help you?**

She asked me what I wanted to say and then told them.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

It hasn't. I haven't heard anything back.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Not very satisfied.

**Do you have anything more to say about how satisfied you were with the outcome of your complaint?**

I don't feel as though it's been sorted.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

Nothing, it was a waste of time.

**What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

It wasn't sorted.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

Let the child have the results.

**From a 15-year-old living in a children's home**

**What was your last complaint about?**

Not been consulted about appointments regarding me.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

Staff at the home.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Youth offending worker.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Got a good relationship with her.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

Yes.

**How exactly did your advocate help you?**

By assisting me to put my views across.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

Staff and youth worker dealt with it in house.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

Verbally by staff at the home.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

Now the field worker consults with me directly before making arrangements.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Very satisfied.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

Yes, the field worker talks to me to make arrangements.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

I got listened to by professionals.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

No.

**From a disabled 14-year-old in a residential special school**

**What was your last complaint about?**

The fire bell in my bedroom.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I told staff I didn't like it.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Residential staff.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Because she runs residence.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

She spoke to others about it.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

She spoke to me about it.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

Fire bell could not be moved from my room.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Not at all satisfied.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

Yes. I need to have my door open all night and my headphones in.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

Nothing.

**What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

Couldn't do anything about it.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

Could have had an appeal about it.

**From a 16-year-old in a children's home**

**What was your last complaint about?**

My last complaint was about the staff of a previous care home.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I discussed with my social worker and my advocate.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Social worker.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

I chose this person because it was the best thing to do.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

It was solved by talking to the social worker who talked to the staff.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

My social worker told me by letter.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

The staff changed their behaviour.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Completely satisfied.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

Yes, the staff listened to me more.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

It gave me confidence.

**What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

Asking the staff to give me a complaint form.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

No.

**From a disabled 15-year-old in a residential special school**

**What was your last complaint about?**

Being bullied.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I told another young person.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

I told a teacher.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Because they would have done more about it.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

Teacher spoke to the young person.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

The teacher told me.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

I was given advice about how to deal with the young person in future.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Somewhat satisfied.

**Do you have anything more to say about how satisfied you were with the outcome of your complaint?**

After school I told my key worker as we were both in residence that night. I phoned my mum who gave me advice.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

Yes, I am getting on better with the young person now.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

Helped me be less anxious.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

No.

**From a 17-year-old in a children's home**

**What was your last complaint about?**

My last complaint was about the social services failing to act on sorting out who my social worker was going to be.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I had spoken with the staff at the home about making the complaint.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

The home's staff team and solicitors.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

So they could help me to make the right choices.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

Yes.

**How exactly did your advocate help you?**

They had legal knowledge.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

Ongoing.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

Getting the issue resolved.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

The social services should have sorted me out with a social worker as soon as I turned 16.

### **From a 16-year-old in a children's home**

#### **What was your last complaint about?**

A member of staff pushing me over my bed.

#### **Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I didn't speak to anyone. I just asked for a complaint form and filled it out.

#### **Who did you make your complaint to?**

Social worker.

#### **Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Don't know.

#### **Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

#### **Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

Police got called and took my version of events and the member of staff's version.

#### **How were you told the result of your complaint?**

In person by my social worker.

#### **What was the result of your complaint?**

There wasn't enough evidence so I got moved children's homes.

#### **How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Not at all satisfied.

#### **Do you have anything more to say about how satisfied you were with the outcome of your complaint?**

Yes, I'm not happy at all. It seems like I was lying and also it got put on my risk assessment saying I tell lies on staff.

#### **Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

No.

#### **What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

Nothing.

#### **What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

Everything.

#### **Should anything have been done differently?**

Yes, he should have got into trouble not me. It seems I was the bad one.

### **From a 15-year-old in a children's home**

#### **What was your last complaint about?**

My last complaint I made was against the county council because I was fighting to stay in my placement in another county until I am 18.

#### **Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I had discussions with the care home I live in and the house manager, and also my family and my social worker.

#### **Who did you make your complaint to?**

Care home staff and manager.

#### **Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Because I trust them.

#### **Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

Yes.

#### **How exactly did your advocate help you?**

My advocate was really helpful when I made this complaint against the county council.

#### **Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

The county council are still looking into it.

#### **How were you told the result of your complaint?**

Post.

#### **How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Not very satisfied.

#### **Should anything have been done differently?**

Don't know the outcome of it yet.





### **From a 14-year-old in a children's home**

#### **What was your last complaint about?**

My last complaint was about a member of staff using abusive language to me and other young people.

#### **Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

We discussed what would happen if he did it again.

#### **Who did you make your complaint to?**

The manager.

#### **Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Because I knew that she would do something about it.

#### **Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

#### **Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

I can't remember.

#### **How were you told the result of your complaint?**

Very formally.

#### **What was the result of your complaint?**

He was disciplined.

#### **How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Completely satisfied.

#### **Do you have anything more to say about how satisfied you were with the outcome of your complaint?**

Nope.

#### **Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

Yes, he didn't swear while in the presence of us.

#### **What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

There's nothing good about a complaint.

#### **What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

Writing.

### **Should anything have been done differently?**

Nope, it was fine.

### **From a 15-year-old in a children's home**

#### **What was your last complaint about?**

I complained about being moved from my current address to an area I didn't feel safe in. I am pregnant and was told that I needed to move to a foster placement and the only one available was in an area where I didn't feel safe.

#### **Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I spoke to children's home staff and my social worker.

#### **Who did you make your complaint to?**

I wrote a letter of complaint to the head of social services and went to discuss my complaint with them

#### **Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

I was advised to do this by the staff at my children's home.

#### **Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

Yes.

#### **How exactly did your advocate help you?**

They helped me make my complaint and supported me when I had to go and discuss this. They were there to talk on my behalf but did encourage me to do this myself.

#### **Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

This is still being looked into.

#### **How were you told the result of your complaint?**

No decision has been made yet but because of my due date my move is still going ahead.

#### **What was the result of your complaint?**

I have still got to move to this area.

#### **How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Not at all satisfied.

**Do you have anything more to say about how satisfied you were with the outcome of your complaint?**

I feel that more provisions should be made available to give young people more choice.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**  
No.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

It made me feel like at least I'd tried to do something about my situation – and that maybe this will help other young people in the future.

**What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

Because it didn't alter my situation which is very frustrating.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

I feel that my social worker should have started looking earlier and this might have given me more options.

### **From a 20-year-old care leaver**

**What was your last complaint about?**

My old social worker. Didn't feel my views were being listened to or taken seriously.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

Spoke to the social worker about how she was making me feel and she didn't at all look interested so I decided to contact the Children's Rights Officer.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Children's Rights Officer.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Because I knew about her and how she could help so she was the perfect source to approach as I knew the issue would be resolved.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**  
No.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

I rang the Children's Rights Officer and left a message. She contacted me and I told her what the issue was. She contacted my social worker.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

The Children's Rights Officer called me and told me.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

I guess my social worker was told she had to listen to me because after I made the complaint her attitude towards me changed.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Very satisfied.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

Yes, my social worker's attitude towards me. Still had problems with her but my main issue was dealt with.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

Knowing that the situation would be sorted and I wouldn't have to chase up the case.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

I think a meeting should have been called between me and my social worker to discuss our differences.

### **From a 16-year-old in a children's home**

**What was your last complaint about?**

About the way company handled a young person.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I told the staff I was unhappy with the company and they suggested if I had a worry then I am best complaining.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Carers.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Because they are there to listen to.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

I sent the complaint to the manager of my home and then she sent it off to Head Office.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

By the manager.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

The young person was moved.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Completely satisfied.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

Yes, the young person was removed.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

The atmosphere in the house.

**What was the WORST thing about making this complaint?**

There wasn't anything.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

He should have been moved earlier.

**From a care leaver, age not given**

**What was your last complaint about?**

My last complaint was when a member of staff hurt me.

**Tell us about any discussions you had about it with anyone else before you decided to make the complaint.**

I told a member of staff that my arm was hurting the following day and me and her rang the head of care in the children's home and she told me to make a complaint and she would follow it up the next day.

**Who did you make your complaint to?**

Head of care in the children's home.

**Why did you choose them to make your complaint to?**

Because my arm was really hurting and I didn't want him working with me again.

**Did you have an advocate (someone speaking on your behalf) to help you make your complaint?**

No.

**Exactly how did your complaint get looked into?**

The head of care and the manager in the children's home was discussing about it and told my social worker what had happened.

**How were you told the result of your complaint?**

I was told by the manager.

**What was the result of your complaint?**

The result was he didn't have to do a shift with me again.

**How satisfied were you with the result of your complaint?**

Completely satisfied.

**Do you have anything more to say about how satisfied you were with the outcome of your complaint?**

I was very satisfied because I felt safe that I didn't have to be on shift with him again.

**Did anything change as a result of your complaint?**

Yes, he couldn't work with me again.

**What was the BEST thing about making this complaint?**

Knowing that I could tell someone about it and that it would be dealt with.

**Should anything have been done differently?**

No.





# How should complaints procedures change?

We used electronic screens at our consultation event to ask children and young people during the day to tell us their views on the best ways for complaints to be sorted out in the future, and to give us their advice for children making complaints.

Of the 44 views entered about the **best ways for schools to sort out complaints** in the future, these were the most common proposals.

- Individual school staff to be expected to sort out complaints students take to them.
- Keep developing effective complaints procedures.
- The headteacher should sort out individual complaints.
- Issues that students have complained about should be sorted out through school meetings.
- Sort complaints out by discussion with the individual pupil.

Thirty-seven views were entered on the screens about the **best ways for social care services to sort out complaints** in the future. Here are the most common proposals made.

- Discuss complaints with the child to resolve them.
- Deal with complaints more quickly than now.
- Have telephone numbers for children to make complaints to senior staff.
- Have easier complaints forms for children to use.
- Social workers to sort out individual complaints.
- Keep children informed about what is happening to their complaint.

The big difference between proposals about social care complaints and those for school complaints was that **children wanted social care complaints to be sorted out faster than they are at present**. Nobody made that point about school complaints systems. One person summed up the need to make social care complaints systems work faster: 'By making it quicker to deal with our complaints and get them directly to

the person in a position who deals with complaints, so we don't have to wait ages for a response.'

We also used our electronic screens to ask children and young people to set out what advice they would give to someone looking into a complaint in the future. We had 40 entries on the screens, and they were a mixture of advice to adults investigating children's complaints, and some further advice to children themselves who were thinking of making a complaint.

The most common types of **advice given for children considering making a complaint** were: **to go to an adult who can sort things out; to talk it over with your social worker; to be patient because getting a complaint sorted out can take a long time; not to back down if you aren't listened to at first; and to write things down calmly.**

Here is one young person's advice from their own experience of making a complaint: 'Always write a complaint when you're calm and always re-read what you have written, make sure you're using the right facts before you send the complaint, also make sure something gets done even if it's something little to start with.'

Here is a summary of all the advice to those investigating, considering and responding to children's complaints in the future, from both the entries on our electronic screens and from our discussion groups.

- **Take what children say seriously and respect their views and concerns:** if you are an advocate, or making a complaint on a child's behalf, 'make sure you always include what the child wants to say and their voice is heard'; 'respect the young person's view'; 'help the child and respect what they're saying'.
- **Actually read complaints children make:** 'Read it carefully.'
- **Help children write their complaints down if they want:** 'Help them fill in their complaints forms.'
- **Talk to individual children about their complaint:** 'To read my complaint and to discuss with me what will happen.'



- **Keep going until things are sorted out:** ‘Don’t stop till it’s dealt with.’
- **Keep children informed about what is happening with their complaint:** ‘to see what they can do and tell the children’; ‘tell me what is happening each step of the way’; ‘to always feed back to the child’.
- **Hear each side of a complaint and make your own judgement:** when you are making a decision on a complaint, ‘Listen to both sides of the story and then make a decision.’
- **Always have independent people to sort out any complaint from a child,** to make sure that the person it goes to sorts it out just in the child’s interests and not their own.
- **Try to sort complaints out quickly.**
- **Don’t automatically tell a child’s carers that they have made a complaint about how they are looked after** – that can make life difficult for the child because they complained, and can put children off making a complaint.

‘Social services make you feel guilty if you’re not happy’

- **Make it clear to every child that they can make a complaint.**
- **Make sure that children can speak to someone in confidence about things that are worrying them.**
- **Children should be able to tell who they want to tell.**
- **Always keep a written record of a complaint and its results:** ‘so you can back up what they’ve said’; ‘if it’s in black and white they can’t say otherwise’.
- **Don’t make promises to the child that you can’t keep.**
- **Never ignore a complaint.**
- **Make an individual response to the child and their complaint** – don’t use standard letters.
- **Train foster carers more about the complaints process.**
- **Never make the child feel guilty about making a complaint.** Give the child support if they are feeling bad about making a complaint: ‘Social services make you feel guilty if you’re not happy and want to move, like it’s your fault that you’re not settled.’
- **Always have a way for the child to appeal against the results of a complaint.**
- **Tell the child the role of everybody dealing with their complaint.**

From our groups, we heard the strong message that **different children, and different problems, may need different sorts of complaints procedures – ‘different things for different people’**. For example, for some children it is much easier to talk about problems with someone they trust to help sort them out, without being faced with standard ‘complaints forms’ they have to fill in. But for other children, writing something down in a letter or form is much easier than having to talk face to face with someone about a problem. One child said, ‘You can’t show emotion on a piece of paper.’

Some children preferred to have someone they could go to if they had a worry or complaint, while others preferred to have someone who came regularly to check whether they had a complaint or concern. Some would like to be able to make complaints online, others by text, and others wanted to be able to make complaints anonymously: ‘It’s just on paper and you have to put your name at the bottom and anything could happen to them – it should be anonymous.’

**Children need to be able to make complaints the way they feel easiest and safest.**

One child told us that staff and carers assume that if you can write things, then you should write things, but this is not so: ‘They ask if you are literate – but if I am it doesn’t mean I want to write it or find that easy.’

**‘Always write a complaint when you’re calm and always re-read what you have written, make sure you’re using the right facts before you send the complaint, also make sure that something gets done even if it’s something little to start with’**



# Last words

Here are some final views about complaints procedures from children and young people we consulted.

‘It’s the child’s right to make a complaint’

‘What is the point of complaining and having a complaints procedure if after everything and a long process, nothing gets done and you feel let down? It feels terrible to be let down by professionals, after you already have trust issues and are in care because you’ve been let down’

And lastly, here is how one young person summed up how a good children’s complaints procedure would work.

‘Write it down, get people involved, gets sorted’

**My own last word after hearing the children’s views and experiences of making complaints is that we definitely haven’t got complaints procedures right for children yet. From what the children have told me, there is a real need for the government to review and improve children’s complaints procedures, taking on board what the children have said about them, and the proposals they have made for making them better.**

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