

**Looked After Young People and the  
Complaints Procedure -**

**Consultation and Engagement  
Project**

**Young People's Engagement Team**

**Social Care and Health Directorate**

November 04

## **Background:**

An effective complaints procedure is seen as an integral part of the system of safeguards for Looked After children and young people. Yet research evidence throughout the country suggests that the procedure is still failing to provide this safeguard, largely because of the difficulties that looked-after children face in accessing it. Even in South Tyneside we recognise that there is a lack of complaints about children's services from children themselves, rather than from adults.

Recently there has been a raft of new government proposals for improving the complaints procedure for children and young people Looked After, these include the amendments to section 26 of the Children Act 1989, to the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and publication of National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services. Also one of the roles for the new statutory children's commissioner envisaged in the green paper 'Every Child Matters' is to "work with the relevant ombudsman and statutory bodies to ensure that children have quick and easy access to complaints procedures that work".

The Young People's Engagement Team and the Complaints Officer planned to find out what Looked After children and young people thought about South Tyneside's current complaints procedure. The young people were then able to help us plan a more young person orientated procedure for Children's Services Complaints.

## **Aim Of The Project:**

Develop a child-centred complaints strategy

## **Objectives:**

- ➔ Consult with young people to determine their current understanding and satisfaction with the complaints procedure
- ➔ Work with young people to obtain ideas for new ways of working so that the complaints procedure is more accessible to young people
- ➔ Increase the knowledge of the complaints procedure amongst the boroughs Looked After population.
- ➔ Develop a new Complaints form as part of the new procedures.

## **Methodology:**

The Young Peoples Engagement Team co-ordinated a series of consultation exercises with Looked After Young People.

This consultation sought to identify current levels of satisfaction with the system and how it could be improved. One to one interviews with Looked After young people were arranged and this produced a great deal of information about young people's personal experience of the complaints system.

After the information from the interviews was collated and evaluated it was presented to the Newsletter Design Groups who meet to design the LAC newsletters.

The design groups used this information to identify new ways of making the procedures more accessible and young people centred. They also developed new ideas for supporting children and young people with their complaints.

The young people who attend the Fostering Reference group were also asked for their comments on the suggestions of the Design group and added their own ideas for improvements.

## **A summary of the findings from the one to one interviews**

Between March and May 04 the Young People's Engagement Officer met up with 25 looked after young people to ask them what they thought about the complaints system. The engagement officer met up with the young people in a one to one situation in order to compare this with other methods used in the past.

The aim of the exercise was to speak to a relatively small number of young people but to ask them some in depth questions.

The young people involved were aged between 6yrs and 15yrs old, and there was a mixture of residential and foster placements.

**The young people were asked -**

What is a complaint?

Do you know how to make a complaint about the way you are looked after?

Have you ever made a complaint?

Who did you complain to?

What response did you get?

Have you ever wanted to make a complaint but didn't because you were frightened/hesitant/embarrassed/worried about what would happen if you did?

What do you think would happen if you made a complaint?

If you wanted to make a complaint about being looked after - would you like an independent person to help you?

How would you like to contact this person?

Do you think it would be useful to for someone to visit you to help you to complain?

If you were not happy with the outcome what do you think should happen?

How can we help/support you to make a complaint?

Who do you think should know about your complaint?

Do you think the current system is working?

Their views are summarised below:

**1) What is a complaint?**

The majority of the young people knew that a complaint was being unhappy about something but few actually made the distinction between being unhappy and actually doing something about it - a few mention writing it down or telling someone.

Three young people knew that the purpose of a complaint was to get something sorted out or in one person's words "get the problem fixed".

**2) Do you know how to make a complaint about the way you are looked after?**

The majority of young people said that you had to tell someone - but when asked who? They were rather vague. Most said their carers, a few said social workers and some said teachers at The PLACE. When asked what they would do if they wanted to complain about their carer most didn't know what they would do and two young people didn't know that you could

complain about a carer. Three young people, both older and both in residential care knew that you could ring the complaints officer and/or fill in a complaints form. However one of them did not know the number or how to get hold of a form. They also knew that they could use the "complaints book" which is to be found in all the residential units and is their "in-house" complaints procedure.

### **3) Have you ever made a complaint? And if so who to?**

Five young people had made a complaint and fifteen hadn't. Of the five who had made a complaint, only two had made a formal complaint which would have gone to the complaints officer, the others had used either the "in house" complaints book (in this case it was resolved before it got to the stage where the complaints officer would be involved) or to their carer. In this case the carer then told the social worker (whom the complaint was about) and they subsequently apologised. It is important to note however that although an apology was received there was no change of practice and the young person (and the carer) were left feeling unhappy about the outcome.

### **4) What response did you get?**

As mentioned two young people had their complaints resolved by the residential manager - to the point where police were called in one case, two complaints were resolved by complaints officer and the other was seemingly resolved but the young person was not happy about the outcome.

### **5) Have you ever wanted to make a complaint but didn't because you were frightened/hesitant/embarrassed/worried about what would happen if you did? And what do you think would happen if you did?**

Five young people said that they had been put off from making a complaint and fifteen said that they had not.

The reasons given for not making a complaint included:

Didn't think the problem was serious enough

Not sure what would happen to you if you complain

People would tell you to stop being stupid and you were being ungrateful

You might get your carer into trouble

Afraid other young people (who you live with) might get angry

Someone would get shouted at  
People might think you were always complaining - whinging

**6) If you wanted to make a complaint about being looked after - would you like an independent person to help you?**

Half the young people thought it would be "really good" to have someone that didn't know you as long as they knew the situation - while the other half disagreed and wanted someone they knew really well to help them. After further discussion it became clear that the young people would be happy for anyone to help them as long as they were someone that they could trust. This is why they wanted someone they knew as they felt this was how they could tell whether they were trustworthy.

**7) How would you like to contact this person?**

The most popular means of contacting this "complaints" person was via email - 15 said that they would like to complain by phone but some of these young people pointed out that they had to ask permission to use the telephone and might not want to tell their carer that they were ringing someone to help them make a complaint!

Whereas they said that they could email from home or from school with anonymity.

The young people in residential children's homes said that they thought a member of staff would help them to ring or write to the complaints officer unless the complaint was about staff.

When asked whether the Do U Care? website would be useful for this they all replied that it would. 10 young people said that they could write a letter or post something while two said that their social worker may be able to contact them on their behalf.

**8) Do you think it would be useful to for someone to visit you to help you to complain?**

Nearly all of the young people thought that it would be helpful for someone to come out and see them and to help them fill in a complaints form. They said that it would be easier for them to send out a simple

card or email to contact the complaints officer and for them to then help them fill in the form.

Only one young person thought that it would be quicker and easier to complain by themselves.

**9) If you were not happy with the outcome what do you think should happen?**

All of the young people thought that they should have the chance to complain again - some (12 young people) suggested that they be allowed to "speak to the boss of social services about it" - so that they have a chance to explain why they are not happy.

**10) How can we help/support you to make a complaint?**

The answers given here can be grouped into two categories:

- Provide more information about the system i.e. what they can complain about, what happens to their complaint and who is going to find out.
- Make the process simple.

**11) Who do you think should know about your complaint?**

Some people said that no-one except the person dealing with the complaint should know about it, while some of the others were more discerning and said that everyone should know about the *complaint* but no-one should know that it *was you who made it*.

**12) Do you think the current system is working?**

Most of the young people were not sure whether the system was working - they didn't know what was supposed to be happening and so they couldn't judge whether it was doing what it was supposed to.

## **Designing a User Friendly Process**

Once the above information had been collated and written up into a young person friendly format it was presented to the young people from the design groups.

They worked on this over a number of months as well as completing other tasks.

The young people were presented with various ideas and helped to choose the proposals that they thought would be most effective.

Part of this process included designing new "Complaints" materials to be used by Looked After children and young people - these were new posters, complaints forms and complaints cards.

Other young people were also involved in this process and these included the Fostering Reference group and the PLACE After School club.

The young people suggested that a variety of possible methods of complaining would be the most effective way of ensuring that the process was user friendly. They also thought that this was important due to the large age group that might need to use the procedure.

The young people's proposals are as follows:

### **Post Card Pack**

This pack would replace the current generic complaints leaflet. It would consist of a small A6 folder (post card size) comprising 5 individual post cards. These are:

- What is a complaint? Card (for info.)
- Contact card (for sending to complaints officer)
- Sticker sheet (for describing nature of complaint)
- Advocacy card (for info)
- Useful numbers card (for info)

An example of this pack can be found in appendix 1.

### **Freephone Complaints Telephone line**

New free phone complaints telephone line, gets you through to Ros Watters or her answer machine for out of hours calls. Machine allows you to leave message and gives important numbers that you can ring. It is a

free phone number so that young people do not have to get permission to ring.

### **Online - DoUCare website**

Online complaints form which when sent by young person is sent directly to Ros' email inbox, it can also be directed to any named person e.g. Young People's Engagement Officer.

### **New Promotional Posters**

These are necessary to promote the changes to the complaints system - to be displayed in all SC&H offices and anywhere where young people congregate. It will also raise the profile of LAC complaints and the right that children have to complain.

The young people have begun the design process for what the actual literature would look like, but the look of the finished article will depend on the constraints of the printing process and professional designers.

### **Cost:**

Further funds needed to implement young people's ideas are as follows:

#### **Develop and print new poster advertising the new elements of the system -**

Printing, A2,A3,A4

Up to £150 for 500

#### **Complaints leaflet, Printing of new designs -**

For the sticker sheets	500 is £94
Folders 4 colour	500 is £309
Postcards(5 varieties)	2500 is £250

#### **Setting up and running Freephone Complaints Line -**

Windsor Telecom £99 connection for basic number,  
Rental Free, calls cost 7.5p peak & 5.25 at other times

This means the total amount needed is:

Freephone	£99
Complaints pack	£655
Poster	£150
<b>Total</b>	<b>£904</b>