

REVIEW OF ADULTS SOCIAL CARE COMPLAINTS PROCESS

October 2009

1. INTRODUCTION

In April 2009 the statutory guidance for Adults Social Care complaints management was superseded by the introduction of a new national approach, Making Experiences Counts (MEC).

This MEC approach was developed in order to improve the experience of complainants who have been dissatisfied with both the 'staged' handling of their complaints as well as the fact that they had to approach different authorities separately where complaints straddled both National Health Service (NHS) and Local Authority (LA) work. Both these factors were experienced as hindrances to resolution rather than facilitating resolution.

The New process aims to correct the experiences by introducing a resolution focused process through:

- A Single approach across Adult Social Care and the National Health Services, making provision for much closer complaints management arrangements.
- Focus in a person centred way on resolving concerns and putting into place corrective actions

The new process was rolled across Surrey County Council (SCC) Adult Social Care from 1 April 09.

A review was conducted in October 2009 following the first six months of operation. This review resulted in some changes to the initially rolled out process.

2. THE REQUIREMENTS AND PRINCIPLES OF THE NEW PROCESS

From 1.4.09, Local Authority complaints processes rest on the following principles:

LISTEN	Involve the complainant at the outset in clarifying the concerns and agreeing how best to resolve these
RESPOND	Ensure concerns are looked into and a response outlining actions and service learning is provided to the complainant
IMPROVE	Identify the corrective actions and ensures these are taken forward to improve/correct the service

In addition, the process must ensure that responses are :

COORDINATED	That complainants get a coordinated response where the complaint involves more than one social care team or both social and health care services
TIMELY	That the service provides responses to an agreed timescales and non protracted manner – i.e. there is one 'local' opportunity to resolve the matter

For more detail on the new regulations, see:

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3. CRITIQUE OF THE SCC PROCEDURE as implemented on 1.4.09

3.1 Outline of the procedure, as it was implemented on 1.4.09:

When a Complaint is received within SCC, it is forwarded immediately to Families Customer Relations Team (FCRT) for an assessment and central logging.

When a complaint is assessed as a 'less complex case', the following actions are taken: a) the complaint is referred by the FCRT to the relevant team; b) the team manager contacts the complainant to clarify the complaint and agree a response date; and c) team managers sends an acknowledgement and a complaint plan to the complainant.

When a complaint is assessed as a 'more complex case', the following actions are taken: a) the complaint is coordinated by the FCRT; b) the FCRT contacts the complainant to clarify the complaint and agree a response date; c) the FCRT sends an acknowledgement and a complaint plan to complainant.

Whether the complaint is 'less complex' or 'more complex', the response is provided to the agreed timescale and relevant actions are taken. In addition, corrective actions are identified and acted on – which means that lessons are learnt and service is improved.

3.2 Feedback relating to the new process

The feedback available includes comments and observations from front line teams and their managers (this feedback has varied from team to team and varied over the six month period), from FCRT staff, and from the national review undertaken by LGO.

Positive feedback includes:

- the emphasis on contacting complainants at the outset is welcomed as a resolution focused approach
- resolution of complaints has been achieved more quickly due to the initial clarification exercise – i.e. fewer complaints escalate and fewer complaints persist
- the new process has not led to an increase in number of complaints
- a certain flexibility has been introduced into the process allowing for better containment of the complaint matters and for a focus on resolution rather than focus on adherence to a formal process
- initial savings have been noted
- time spent clarifying at the outset is balanced out by the improved outcomes and speedier resolution in the long term

Challenges includes:

- increased FCRT involvement with teams at the initial clarifying and acknowledging stage
- increased FCRT time spent chasing plans, dates responses were sent as well as obtaining copies of provisional responses for the central logging system
- decrease in teams' autonomy in handling complaints – i.e. teams seemed to lose sense of 'ownership' of complaint
- initially teams were concerned at how time consuming it would be to contact complainants at the outset to clarify complaints and agree timescales
- teams and service managers were unsure how to monitor their complaints once the central Customer Feedback database had become unusable and therefore unavailable
- teams were finding it hard to adhere to the 3 day timescale for clarifying and acknowledging a complaint
- teams were confused as to whether clarifying and agreeing the complaint and acknowledging the complaint could be rolled into one task or not

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- teams found the 'plan' and 'outcomes' forms time consuming to complete
- some teams were finding that they were repeating the content of the response letter in the 'outcome' form and felt this to be unnecessary extra work.

3.3 Changes to Process following review and taking into account the challenges identified.

In the light of the above feedback and in discussion with Adults Social care Business Support as well as Performance & Service Development colleagues, a review of the process was undertaken and changes identified in order to a) allow the resolution focused approach to take a better hold, b) to increase achieving agreed timescales and c) to increase the learning from complaints.

Change of emphasis in terms of ownership of complaints

Reinstating the sense of 'ownership' of complaints back to teams by returning the task of initial assessment of complaints to the team with teams seeking FCRT advice as necessary.

The anticipated impact of this change is that it will help:

- reduce the time spent 'to-ing and fro-ing' between teams and FCRT
- improve the quality and timeliness of 'acknowledging' and handling of complaints

Changes relating to monitoring/recording systems

Devising a consistent system for monitoring complaints at a local service level.

Revising the central recording system (this particular change have been taking place over the 6 month period)

The anticipated impact of these changes is that they will help:

- Improve timeliness of responding
- Improve information passing to FCRT
- Improve data integrity and thus improved accuracy as well as scope of reporting

Changes to Complaint Plan and Outcomes tools

Improving the recording of complaint Outcomes (Learning and Actions).

Redesigning the complaint Plan and Outcomes recording tool allowing swifter and more consistent recording at the local team level.

Reviewing Monthly and Quarterly Reporting to improve the relevance of complaints information being provided to management.

The anticipated impact of these changes is that they will help:

- Improve learning
- Improve reporting on learning
- Improve complaint data recording at team level
- Improve communication of data to central recording system

4. THE REVISED PROCESS TOOLS

The process tools have been revised to reflect the changes. These are available to staff on S-net. The full list is detailed in the Process Guidance and Flow Chart tool. Advice and guidance on the new tools is available from the FCRT, especially in form of Complaints Visiting Workshops (flyer also attached).

5. NEXT STEPS : PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

Performance in terms of achieving response timescale has been low and is a priority area for improvement. It is anticipated that the proposed changes to the process (reinforcing ownership of complaints by the service, improving monitoring and communication with FCRT) will bring about the desired improvement in performance. In addition to this, the FCRT in collaboration with the Service plan to explicitly identify obstacles to hitting the performance target and to propose corrective actions. This task is currently underway.