
Resolution Ready Submission to the Joint Committee on Human Rights

Inquiry: Human rights of children in the social care system in England

August 2025

Introduction

Resolution Ready is an independent service specialising in complaints training, quality assurance, and professional resources for children's services. We work with local authorities, trusts across England, giving us a unique insight into how the statutory children's social care complaints process operates in practice.

Our submission focuses on complaints and remedies, drawing on:

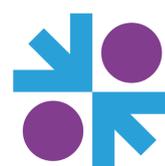
- Our direct involvement in stage one, stage two, and stage three investigations and panels.
- A national research project we undertook, including a review of published local authority complaint reports and a programme of Freedom of Information requests. This provided a snapshot of practice across England. While not a scientific study, the results were consistent with our anecdotal experience and provide useful indicators of national trends.
- The statutory framework itself, namely the Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 and the *Getting the Best from Complaints* statutory guidance.

We highlight systemic barriers that undermine the rights of children and families, but we also recognise examples where the process is powerful, effective, and can deliver meaningful remedies.

1. Children's rights and the complaints process

The statutory complaints process is an essential safeguard within the children's social care system. It gives children and families a formal route to challenge decisions and ensure their voices are heard, supporting rights under Article 8 (respect for private and family life) and Article 6 (access to a fair process).

In practice, though, the process is often characterised by delay, confusion, and lack of clarity. At best, it can take several months from a stage one response to the conclusion of a stage three panel. At worst, and we have seen examples of this, the process can take years. For very few families is it a quick, satisfactory route to resolution. These timescales undermine children's rights by leaving them living with uncertainty, unable to move forward with their lives, and feeling that their concerns are not treated with urgency.



The system is also being asked to carry cases it was never designed for. Families and young people often enter the process expecting compensation or believing it is the only way to challenge decisions. Increasingly, we are also seeing the complaints procedure being used to raise historic concerns or allegations, including experiences of past abuse. While these matters are serious, the complaints framework is not always well equipped to investigate events from many years ago, and this leads to unrealistic expectations and further frustration.

What would help:

- Stricter adherence to statutory timescales, supported by external monitoring.
- Early resolution being prioritised, with complaints seen as part of safeguarding and rights protection, not just a bureaucratic process.
- Clearer communication with children and families about what the complaints process can and cannot do, including the limits of remedies.

2. Accessibility and participation

The complaints process is intended to be child-centred, but in practice it often feels bureaucratic and inaccessible. Young people in particular can find the language, paperwork, and structure difficult to navigate.

Stage three review panels are a striking example. While panels are intended as an important independent safeguard, the format can be overwhelming for families and especially for young people. Even with efforts made to be welcoming, the formality, number of professionals present, and unfamiliar environment make it a daunting experience. This can limit meaningful participation.

Families also often do not understand what a panel can and cannot do. Many expect a reinvestigation of the case, when the regulations only provide for a review of whether the stage two investigation was sound. This gap between expectations and reality fuels mistrust.

What would help:

- More accessible formats for young people, such as child-friendly written explanations, digital tools, or alternative panel structures.
- Greater access to advocacy, particularly for care-experienced young people.
- Better guidance for families about the scope of the process, given at the outset, to prevent unrealistic expectations.

3. Delays and remedies

Delay is the single most consistent theme we see. Families and young people are often left waiting months just to begin an investigation, with decisions effectively “frozen” while complaints are processed. This compounds frustration and can cause further harm to children.

Remedies also remain limited. The statutory framework is designed to provide explanations, apologies, and service improvements, but families often expect



financial compensation. This mismatch in expectations reflects a lack of clarity about what the process is for. Where remedies are delivered, they can be powerful: apologies, changes to practice, and clear acknowledgement of mistakes have had a meaningful impact in some cases.

What would help:

- A stronger national commitment to keeping complaints within statutory timescales.
- Greater emphasis on early and proportionate remedies, avoiding drawn-out processes where swift resolution could have avoided escalation.
- National reporting on timescales to ensure accountability.

4. Independence and consistency

There is a lack of consistency in how local authorities deliver stage two investigations. Some authorities always commission external investigators; others rely heavily on internal staff, with an independent person alongside them as required by regulations. Both models can add value, but there are risks.

Internal investigators may bring knowledge of systems and procedures, but this can also introduce hindsight bias and raise questions of independence. External investigators can bring impartiality but may lack local context. In both cases, we see a common problem: investigators often receive no formal training, despite the complexity of the role. This can lead to variable quality and to families feeling their concerns were not fully understood.

What would help:

- Minimum national training standards for investigating officers and independent people.
- Clearer national guidance on when to use internal versus external investigators, to ensure consistency and parity.
- Greater focus on independence and perceived fairness, recognising that trust in the process depends as much on confidence as on technical compliance.

5. System learning and accountability

The statutory complaints procedure has the potential to drive system-wide improvement. Yet opportunities for learning are too often missed. Complaints are dealt with in isolation, and while some local authorities produce annual reports, there is no consistent national collection or analysis of themes. This means recurring issues—such as poor communication, delays in assessments, or lack of support for care leavers—are raised time and again without systematic change.

Our FOI work and review of local authority complaint reports confirmed this. While the data was incomplete and inconsistent, it revealed wide variation in practice and highlighted the absence of national oversight.

What would help:



- National collation and thematic analysis of complaints, so recurring patterns are visible and addressed.
- Stronger duties on local authorities to publish and act on annual complaint learning.
- Direct consultation with children and young people about their experience of making complaints, to shape future reforms.

Conclusion

The statutory complaints process is a critical safeguard for children and families in the social care system. At its best, it provides an effective route to resolution and a meaningful remedy. But too often it is characterised by delay, confusion, and a lack of accessibility. Children's rights are undermined when complaints take years to resolve, when families do not understand the scope of the process, and when systemic learning is lost.

We urge the Committee to view complaints not as an administrative burden but as a frontline mechanism for protecting rights. Strengthening timescales, participation, independence, and learning would make the process more effective, restore trust, and ensure it plays its vital role in upholding the human rights of children and families.

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