

Principles of complaint handling in combined authorities and devolved settings

Combined authorities will be responsible for new services devolved from central government at a strategic, commissioning and delivery level. They will also integrate and improve current local service delivery. Some individual local authorities will receive powers and responsibilities devolved from central government. All services need to remain accountable to the people that use them. This means councils and combined authorities need to make sure service users have a clear route to redress.

We believe that, with the creation or expansion of every combined authority, there is the opportunity, and the necessity, to create a simple, integrated complaints system that will be:

- better for the public
- better for local accountability and scrutiny, and
- better value for money.

The design of complaints systems and procedures is of course a matter for each authority. Drawing on the lessons of over forty years of local complaints handling, LGO believes the principles set out below are key benchmarks authorities will want to use, to ensure their complaints procedures are simple, fair and encourage organisational improvement.

Better for the public

- The complaints system and individual complaints procedures are simple, well advertised and accessible to the public.
- Everyone in the authority or working on its behalf understands the complaints procedure well.
- Those responding to complaints have the authority and expertise to get at the facts and recommend remedies.
- Problems are resolved as soon as possible after they are identified.
- There is 'no wrong door' for complaints. People can make a complaint without needing to understand and navigate the roles and responsibilities of the different bodies involved.
- Where more than one organisation is involved in the complaint, they work together to provide a single, coordinated response.
- There is a seamless route to redress, covering all the services and structures that are part of the devolution agreement. This could be organised through multi-level devolved complaints handling arrangements which reflect the differing responsibilities and liabilities of bodies within the combined authority, including
 - the strategic functions of the authority, such as economic development and infrastructure, as well as the role of the Mayor/Police and Crime Commissioner,
 - commissioning arrangements, whether at an area or local level,

- service delivery arrangements, whether those services are delivered direct, in partnership with others, or through a public or private contractor,
- the transformation arrangements that may be necessary to create the combined authority and deliver devolved functions.
- There are usually no more than three attempts to resolve a complaint locally, regardless of how many bodies or tiers of administration are involved, before a person is signposted to the Ombudsman (for health and adult social care complaints there are two formal stages – local resolution and complaining to the Local or Health Service Ombudsman).
- There is usually no more than 12 weeks from receipt of a complaint to a final response (unless different timescales apply under a statutory complaints procedure, are agreed with the complainant, or unless shorter timescales apply under contractual/commissioning arrangements).
- The public is signposted without delay to any alternative statutory appeals or complaints processes that are more appropriate.
- The Ombudsman is clearly signposted at the end of the process.
- Learning from complaints is shared with the public.

Better for local accountability and scrutiny

- The authority's Cabinet (or equivalent), will have a central role in championing the complaints process and examining complaints data. It will
 - be responsible for the proper functioning of the area's complaints system, to ensure the public can raise concerns easily and have them addressed quickly and effectively,
 - receive reports on the complaints intelligence available from all bodies in the devolved arrangements, and their partners,
 - use this intelligence to ensure all parts of the system are held to account, to identify opportunities to learn from complaints and improve services, and to ensure the highest standards of accountability and openness,
 - report on complaints annually to the overview and scrutiny committee.

Better value for money

- Learning from complaints is systematically shared and escalated within and between constituent bodies to
 - share good practice
 - avoid repeated mistakes
 - support service improvements
 - inform planning and budgeting.
- Information about complaints at a service level is shared with commissioners.
- Information about complaints at service and commissioning levels is shared at a strategic level.