

# Local Government & Social Care OMBUDSMAN

21 July 2021

*By email*

Ms Etheridge  
Chief Executive  
London Borough of Haringey

Dear Ms Etheridge

## **Annual Review letter 2021**

I write to you with our annual summary of statistics on the decisions made by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman about your authority for the year ending 31 March 2021. At the end of a challenging year, we maintain that good public administration is more important than ever and I hope this feedback provides you with both the opportunity to reflect on your Council's performance and plan for the future.

You will be aware that, at the end of March 2020 we took the unprecedented step of temporarily stopping our casework, in the wider public interest, to allow authorities to concentrate efforts on vital frontline services during the first wave of the Covid-19 outbreak. We restarted casework in late June 2020, after a three month pause.

We listened to your feedback and decided it was unnecessary to pause our casework again during further waves of the pandemic. Instead, we have encouraged authorities to talk to us on an individual basis about difficulties responding to any stage of an investigation, including implementing our recommendations. We continue this approach and urge you to maintain clear communication with us.

## **Complaint statistics**

This year, we continue to focus on the outcomes of complaints and what can be learned from them. We want to provide you with the most insightful information we can and have focused statistics on three key areas:

**Complaints upheld** - We uphold complaints when we find some form of fault in an authority's actions, including where the authority accepted fault before we investigated.

**Compliance with recommendations** - We recommend ways for authorities to put things right when faults have caused injustice and monitor their compliance with our recommendations. Failure to comply is rare and a compliance rate below 100% is a cause for concern.

**Satisfactory remedy provided by the authority** - In these cases, the authority upheld the complaint and we agreed with how it offered to put things right. We encourage the early resolution of complaints and credit authorities that accept fault and find appropriate ways to put things right.

Finally, we compare the three key annual statistics for your authority with similar types of authorities to work out an average level of performance. We do this for County Councils, District Councils, Metropolitan Boroughs, Unitary Councils, and London Boroughs.

Your annual data will be uploaded to our interactive map, [Your council's performance](#), along with a copy of this letter on 28 July 2021. This useful tool places all our data and information about councils in one place. You can find the decisions we have made about your Council, public reports we have issued, and the service improvements your Council has agreed to make as a result of our investigations, as well as previous annual review letters.

I would encourage you to share the resource with colleagues and elected members; the information can provide valuable insights into service areas, early warning signs of problems and is a key source of information for governance, audit, risk and scrutiny functions.

As you would expect, data has been impacted by the pause to casework in the first quarter of the year. This should be considered when making comparisons with previous year's data.

During the year, we issued a public report about your Council and its failure to properly support a family threatened with homelessness. Our investigation found the Council failed to make a suitable plan when it was approached by a family whose landlord had started legal proceedings to evict them and failed to follow the Code of Guidance, which sets out the actions required in these circumstances. We concluded that it was only our intervention and decision to investigate that prompted you to act.

We found evidence that some of your officers were unaware of current law, or your own procedures or had chosen to disregard them. As a result, the family were placed into Bed and Breakfast accommodation for a prolonged period. This situation would be challenging for anybody but the specifics of the family and vulnerabilities of some of the children made it significantly more difficult for them all.

To remedy the injustice caused to the family we recommended the Council make a payment for the distress they had been caused and make an ongoing payment for each week they remained in Bed and Breakfast accommodation. We also recommended it review a sample of other cases to identify if similar issues had occurred and, if so, to offer an appropriate remedy for any injustice caused, and to conduct refresher training on homelessness legislation for staff. I am pleased to note you provided timely evidence of compliance with all the recommendations made and I was able to confirm my satisfaction with the actions taken.

Disappointingly, in a separate case, we had to register a new complaint when the Council failed to comply with the recommendations it had agreed to after we found fault in a Housing Benefit case. Our original investigation found the Council failed to inform the complainant of their appeal rights when taking recovery action on the overpayment of Housing Benefit. We recommended you re-issue the overpayment notification, including details of the appeal rights, and suspend recovery action until the appeal time had elapsed or the appeal outcome was known.

You failed to take the action you had agreed to, resulting in a new complaint being registered for non-compliance. Additional recommendations were made, including an apology for the failure to comply and a refund of payments taken during the period you agreed to suspend recovery.

This was a frustrating process for the individual concerned and led to significant additional resources being required from my office and your Council to resolve the situation satisfactorily.

While it is pleasing that we recorded our satisfaction with your Council's compliance in 24 cases where we recommended a remedy, it is disappointing that in eight of these cases remedies were not completed within the agreed timescales. Some of these delays were due to the specific complexities of the cases and situation. However, several involved simple and straightforward recommendations, such as the issue of an apology or a payment. While I acknowledge the pressures councils are under, such delays add to the injustice already suffered by complainants. Additionally, the actions you agree to take, and your performance in implementing them, are reported publicly on our website, so are likely to generate increased public and media scrutiny in future. I reported my concerns about delays in the remedy process last year and it is concerning that the issues persist.

Overall, your Council's complaint handling and responses to this office have fallen below the standards we expect. The concerns I have are indicative of corporate, systemic issues and I ask that you urgently consider your Council's approach to all aspects of its complaint handling, prioritising good standards of administrative practice, and seeking to improve the process and outcomes for people who complain to you. In doing so, if there is any support we can provide, please contact us.

### **Supporting complaint and service improvement**

I am increasingly concerned about the evidence I see of the erosion of effective complaint functions in local authorities. While no doubt the result of considerable and prolonged budget and demand pressures, the Covid-19 pandemic appears to have amplified the problems and my concerns. With much greater frequency, we find poor local complaint handling practices when investigating substantive service issues and see evidence of reductions in the overall capacity, status and visibility of local redress systems.

With this context in mind, we are developing a new programme of work that will utilise complaints to drive improvements in both local complaint systems and services. We want to use the rich evidence of our casework to better identify authorities that need support to improve their complaint handling and target specific support to them. We are at the start of this ambitious work and there will be opportunities for local authorities to shape it over the coming months and years.

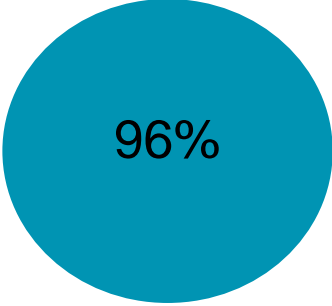
An already established tool we have for supporting improvements in local complaint handling is our successful training programme. During the year, we successfully adapted our

face-to-face courses for online delivery. We provided 79 online workshops during the year, reaching more than 1,100 people. To find out more visit [www.lgo.org.uk/training](http://www.lgo.org.uk/training).

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M King', with a horizontal line underneath.

Michael King  
Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman  
Chair, Commission for Local Administration in England

Complaints upheld		
	<p><b>75%</b> of complaints we investigated were upheld.</p> <p>This compares to an average of <b>72%</b> in similar authorities.</p>	<p><b>27</b> upheld decisions</p> <p>Statistics are based on a total of 36 detailed investigations for the period between 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021</p>
Compliance with Ombudsman recommendations		
	<p>In <b>96%</b> of cases we were satisfied the authority had successfully implemented our recommendations.</p> <p>This compares to an average of <b>99%</b> in similar authorities.</p>	<p>Statistics are based on a total of 24 compliance outcomes for the period between 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Failure to comply with our recommendations is rare. An authority with a compliance rate below 100% should scrutinise those complaints where it failed to comply and identify any learning.</li></ul>		
Satisfactory remedy provided by the authority		
	<p>In <b>7%</b> of upheld cases we found the authority had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman.</p> <p>This compares to an average of <b>12%</b> in similar authorities.</p>	<p><b>2</b> satisfactory remedy decisions</p> <p>Statistics are based on a total of 36 detailed investigations for the period between 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021</p>

**NOTE:** To allow authorities to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, we did not accept new complaints and stopped investigating existing cases between March and June 2020. This reduced the number of complaints we received and decided in the 20-21 year. Please consider this when comparing data from previous years.