

Local Government & Social Care OMBUDSMAN

19 July 2023

By email

Dr Paterson
Chief Executive
Northumberland County Council

Dear Dr Paterson

Annual Review letter 2022-23

I write to you with your annual summary of complaint statistics from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman for the year ending 31 March 2023. The information offers valuable insight about your organisation's approach to complaints. As always, I would encourage you to consider it as part of your corporate governance processes. As such, I have sought to share this letter with the Leader of your Council and Chair of the appropriate Scrutiny Committee, to encourage effective ownership and oversight of complaint outcomes, which offer such valuable opportunities to learn and improve.

The end of the reporting year, saw the retirement of Michael King, drawing his tenure as Local Government Ombudsman to a close. I was delighted to be appointed to the role of Interim Ombudsman in April and look forward to working with you and colleagues across the local government sector in the coming months. I will be building on the strong foundations already in place and will continue to focus on promoting improvement through our work.

Complaint statistics

Our statistics focus on three key areas that help to assess your organisation's commitment to putting things right when they go wrong:

Complaints upheld - We uphold complaints when we find fault in an organisation's actions, including where the organisation accepted fault before we investigated. We include the total number of investigations completed to provide important context for the statistic.

Over the past two years, we have reviewed our processes to ensure we do the most we can with the resources we have. One outcome is that we are more selective about the complaints we look at in detail, prioritising where it is in the public interest to investigate. While providing a more sustainable way for us to work, it has meant that changes in uphold rates this year are not solely down to the nature of the cases coming to us. We are less likely to carry out investigations on 'borderline' issues, so we are naturally finding a higher proportion of fault overall.

Our average uphold rate for all investigations has increased this year and you may find that your organisation's uphold rate is higher than previous years. This means that comparing uphold rates with previous years carries a note of caution. Therefore, I recommend comparing this statistic with

that of similar organisations, rather than previous years, to better understand your organisation's performance.

Compliance with recommendations - We recommend ways for organisations 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 organisation upheld the complaint and we were satisfied with how it offered to put things right. We encourage the early resolution of complaints and credit organisations that accept fault and find appropriate ways to put things right.

Finally, we compare the three key annual statistics for your organisation with similar authorities to provide an average marker of performance. We do this for County Councils, District Councils, Metropolitan Boroughs, Unitary Councils, and London Boroughs.

Your annual data, and a copy of this letter, will be uploaded to our interactive map, [Your council's performance](#), on 26 July 2023. This useful tool places all our data and information about councils in one place. You can find the detail of the decisions we have made about your Council, read the public reports we have issued, and view the service improvements your Council has agreed to make as a result of our investigations, as well as previous annual review letters.

Your organisation's performance

During the year, we [issued one public report](#) about your Council and its decision not to provide free school transport to a young person with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan who was starting college. Our investigation found the Council's post-16 transport policy was not clear enough to enable parents and young people to make informed choices. The policy recommended applicants check their eligibility before applying for a course and transport, but the policy's wording made it difficult for families to do that.

We recommended the Council apologise and make a payment to the young person's mother and reassess the application for transport. We also asked the Council to revise its policy to make it clearer, remind staff of their role to provide timely and accurate information, and to review the decisions it made for the school year starting in 2021 where it refused transport to young people with EHC plans under the flawed policy.

I was pleased to see your Council agreed to carry out these actions, but it was unfortunate there was a lengthy delay in completing them due to staff changes and absences. I am satisfied the agreed actions have now been completed.

More broadly, your Council agreed to, and implemented, the recommendations we made in 15 cases throughout the year. However, it is disappointing that more than a quarter of these cases, you did not complete the remedy within the agreed timescale.

Delay completing agreed recommendations undermines confidence in the Council and the complaints process itself. The Council has the opportunity to consider our recommendations and the proposed timescales when we issue a draft of our decision. It is at this stage you should consider the timescales and tell us if more time will be needed to complete the recommended actions.

I invite the Council to consider how it might make improvements to reduce such delays and to ensure it tells us at draft decision stage if a longer timescale is necessary. I hope to see an improved performance in the year ahead.

Supporting complaint and service improvement

I know that complaints offer organisations a rich source of intelligence and insight that has the potential to be transformational. These insights can indicate a problem with a specific area of service delivery or, more broadly, provide a perspective on an organisation's culture and ability to learn. To realise the potential complaints have to support service improvements, organisations need to have the fundamentals of complaint handling in place. To support you to do so, we have continued our work with the Housing Ombudsman Service to develop a joint complaint handling code that will provide a standard for organisations to work to. We will consult on the code and its implications prior to launch and will be in touch with further details.

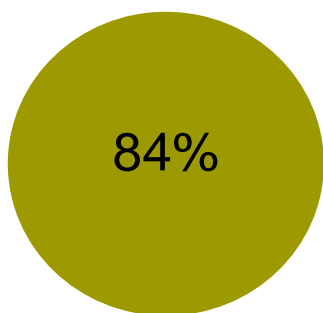
In addition, our successful training programme includes practical interactive workshops that help participants develop their complaint handling skills. We can also offer tailored support and bespoke training to target specific issues your organisation might have identified. We delivered 105 online workshops during the year, reaching more than 1350 people. To find out more visit www.lgo.org.uk/training or get in touch at training@lgo.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,



Paul Najsarek
Interim Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
Interim Chair, Commission for Local Administration in England

Complaints upheld



84% of complaints we investigated were upheld.

This compares to an average of **72%** in similar organisations.

16
upheld decisions

Statistics are based on a total of **19** investigations for the period between 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023

Compliance with Ombudsman recommendations



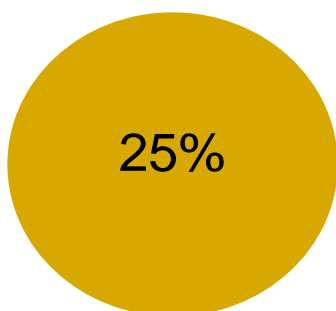
In **100%** of cases we were satisfied the organisation had successfully implemented our recommendations.

This compares to an average of **99%** in similar organisations.

Statistics are based on a total of **15** compliance outcomes for the period between 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023

- Failure to comply with our recommendations is rare. An organisation with a compliance rate below 100% should scrutinise those complaints where it failed to comply and identify any learning.

Satisfactory remedy provided by the organisation



In **25%** of upheld cases we found the organisation had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman.

This compares to an average of **13%** in similar organisations.

4
satisfactory remedy decisions

Statistics are based on a total of **16** upheld decisions for the period between 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023