

# Local Government & Social Care OMBUDSMAN

19 July 2023

*By email*

Ms Beach  
Chief Executive  
Suffolk County Council

Dear Ms Beach

## **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 have received a high volume of complaints about your Council's Special Educational Needs (SEN) service and issued two public reports highlighting our findings of fault in this area.

[The first related](#) to the Council's failure to secure provision set out in a child's Education, Health and Care plan. We found there had been delay in the annual review process and, as a result, occupational therapy provision for the child was delayed. We recommended a payment of over £6,000 for the child and their parent in recognition of this, as well as requiring the Council to put in place service improvements to prevent recurrence.

The [second public report](#) related to the Council's failure to provide appropriate alternative education while a child was absent from school for six months. We found the Council at fault as it could not provide evidence to show it had assessed the child's needs or considered alternative education. We recommended a payment of £1,500 for the child and their parent in recognition of this, as well as requiring the Council to put in place service improvements to prevent the same thing happening to others.

I am pleased to note we recorded our satisfaction with your Council's compliance in most of the cases where we made a recommendation to remedy a complaint. However, I am very concerned to note there were two cases where our recommendations were not complied with. Both of these cases related to complaints about your SEN service and in both instances we had to open new investigations to consider the Council's non-compliance and to recommend further payments to remedy the ongoing injustice caused. Failing to comply with our recommendations reflects extremely poorly on the Council and undermines residents' confidence that it is genuinely willing and committed to putting matters right when it has been at fault.

In last year's letter, concerns were noted about late responses to our investigation enquiries, so I am disappointed to note over a third of your Council's responses to this office were late this year. Such delays add to the injustice already suffered by complainants and I am concerned our enquiries are not being afforded the priority they require.

Given the ongoing issues I have outlined, I would welcome an opportunity to meet to discuss the concerns and to consider any support my office can offer to help improve the situation.

### **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](http://www.lgo.org.uk/training) or get in touch at [training@lgo.org.uk](mailto:training@lgo.org.uk).

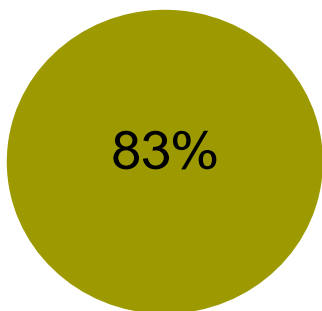
We were pleased to deliver three online complaint handling courses to your staff during the year. I welcome your Council's investment in good complaint handling training and trust the courses were useful to you.

Yours sincerely,



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

### Complaints upheld



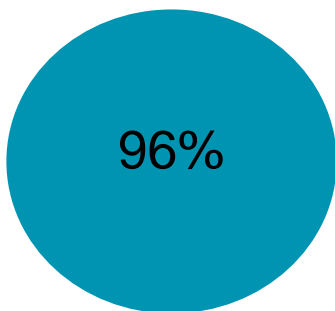
**83%** of complaints we investigated were upheld.

This compares to an average of **80%** in similar organisations.

**62**  
upheld decisions

Statistics are based on a total of **75** investigations for the period between 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023

### Compliance with Ombudsman recommendations



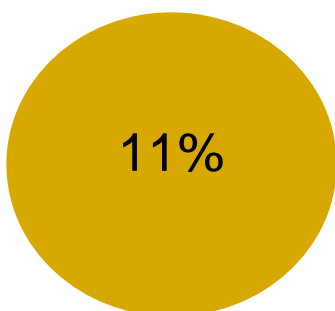
In **96%** of cases we were satisfied the organisation had successfully implemented our recommendations.

This compares to an average of **100%** in similar organisations.

Statistics are based on a total of **57** 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 **11%** of upheld cases we found the organisation had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman.

This compares to an average of **6%** in similar organisations.

**7**  
satisfactory remedy decisions

Statistics are based on a total of **62** upheld decisions for the period between 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023