

17 July 2024

By email

Ms Manson
Chief Executive
Devon County Council

Dear Ms Manson

Annual Review letter 2023-24

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 2024. The information offers valuable insight about your organisation's approach to complaints, and I know you will 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 ensure effective ownership and oversight of complaint outcomes, which offer valuable opportunities to learn and improve. In addition, this year, we have encouraged Monitoring Officers to register to receive the letter directly, supporting their role to report the decisions we uphold to their council.

For most of the reporting year, Paul Najsarek steered the organisation during his tenure as interim Ombudsman, and I was delighted to take up the role of Ombudsman in February 2024. I look forward to working with you and colleagues across the local government sector to ensure we continue to harness the value of individual complaints and drive and promote systemic change and improvement across the local government landscape.

While I know this ambition will align with your own, I am aware of the difficult financial circumstances and service demands that make continuous improvement a challenging focus for the sector. However, we will continue to hold organisations to account through our investigations and recommend proportionate actions to remedy injustice. Despite the challenges, I have great confidence that you recognise the valuable contribution and insight complaints, and their swift resolution, offer to improve services for the public.

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. This year, we also provide the number of upheld complaints per 100,000 population.

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 agreed with how it offered to put things right. We encourage the early resolution of complaints and give credit to 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 24 July 2024. 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 a public report](#) about your Council's administration of special guardianship allowance. Our investigation found the Council was deducting child benefit from the special guardianship allowance of a person in receipt of means-tested benefits. This is against Government guidance and was found to be without good reason. We also found the Council misrepresented our long-standing position on this issue during its own investigation of the complaint, delayed in dealing with the complaint and failed to give the complainant appropriate support when she became a special guardian. This meant the complainant had received less money than she should have done for several years and was put to time and trouble in complaining to the Council. We also found the fault affected another 170 special guardians and potentially affected another 125 carers. Furthermore, the delays the complainant experienced in stage two of the Council's investigation appeared to be systemic.

It is to the Council's credit that, during the investigation, it said it would introduce a new policy from 1 January 2024 ensuring no deductions of child benefit were made from any special guardian in receipt of means-tested benefits from that date. It also readily agreed to pay the complainant a sum equivalent to the deductions from January 2022, and two payments for the delay in the complaints process and the lack of information and support.

Additionally, it agreed to review the cases of others who had potentially lost out and, where appropriate, to recalculate their allowance. It also committed to review the operation of its complaints processes on a quarterly basis to ensure statutory timescales are being met. Where they are not met, it has agreed to escalate the matter to a suitable committee to consider potential solutions to the problem.

We are pleased to note the personal remedy for the complainant has been implemented and the other actions are in progress.

In last year's letter, concerns were raised about delayed and incomplete responses to our investigation enquiries. While there has been some improvement in the volume of delayed responses, some of the delays we have seen have been particularly lengthy. Concerningly, in two cases, responses were only received after we reminded the Council of our powers to issue a witness summons in order to get the information we require. Many of the delayed responses have related to special educational needs and

have involved children and young people out of school. Delay in these investigations means potential injustice remains ongoing and unremedied.

The Council's Link Officer has again been proactive in explaining the resource issues faced by the Council generally and their department specifically. Although we understand and recognise these pressures, we must hold the Council to the same expectations we place on all councils.

I do hope to see an improved picture in the year ahead. If there is any support my office can provide to help improve the situation, please do let me know.

Supporting complaint and service improvement

In February, following a period of consultation, we launched the [Complaint Handling Code](#) for councils, setting out a clear process for responding to complaints effectively and fairly. It is aligned with the Code issued to housing authorities and landlords by the Housing Ombudsman Service and we encourage you to adopt the Code without undue delay. Twenty councils have volunteered to take part in an implementation pilot over the next two years that will develop further guidance and best practice.

The Code is issued to councils under our powers to provide guidance about good administrative practice. We expect councils to carefully consider the Code when developing policies and procedures and will begin considering it as part of our processes from April 2026 at the earliest.

The Code is considered good practice for all organisations we investigate (except where there are statutory complaint handling processes in place), and we may decide to issue it as guidance to other organisations in future.

Our successful complaint handling training programme continues to develop with new modules in Adult Social Care and Children's Services complaint handling available soon. All our courses include practical interactive workshops that help participants develop their complaint handling skills. We delivered 126 online workshops during the year, reaching more than 1,700 people. To find out more visit www.lgo.org.uk/training or get in touch at training@lgo.org.uk.

We were pleased to deliver two online complaint handling courses to staff at Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust during the year. I welcome your Council's investment in good complaint handling training and trust the courses were useful to you.

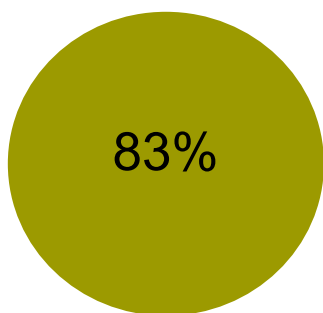
Returning to the theme of continuous improvement, we recognise the importance of reflecting on our own performance. With that in mind I encourage you to share your view of our organisation via this survey: <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/ombudsman/>. Your responses will help us to assess our impact and improve our offer to you. We want to gather a range of views and welcome multiple responses from organisations, so please do share the link with relevant colleagues.

Yours sincerely,



Amerdeep Somal
Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
Chair, Commission for Local Administration in England

Complaints upheld



83% of complaints we investigated were upheld.

This compares to an average of **85%** in similar organisations.

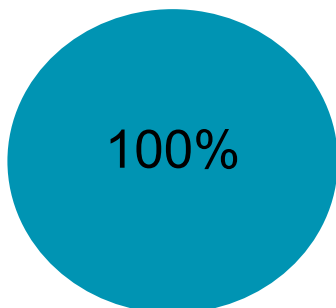
68
upheld decisions

This is 8.2 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents.

The average for authorities of this type is 4.5 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents.

Statistics are based on a total of **82** investigations for the period between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024

Compliance with Ombudsman recommendations



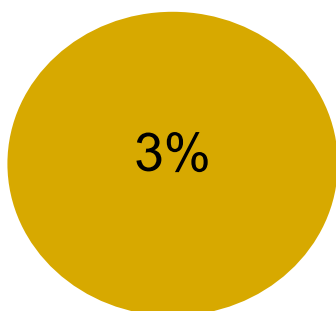
In **100%** of cases we were satisfied the organisation had successfully implemented our recommendations.

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

Statistics are based on a total of **64** compliance outcomes for the period between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024

- 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 **3%** of upheld cases we found the organisation had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman.

This compares to an average of **7%** in similar organisations.

2
satisfactory remedy decisions

Statistics are based on a total of **68** upheld decisions for the period between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024