

17 July 2024

By email

Ms Earnshaw
Chief Executive
West Northamptonshire Council

Dear Ms Earnshaw

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, there were several occasions when our investigations were delayed by your Council's failure to respond in a timely way to our requests for information. More than half of the Council's responses to our enquiries were late and, in one case, we also had to remind the Council of our powers to issue a witness summons before we received the necessary information.

Disappointingly, delay was also an issue in the remedy process. While I welcome that your Council agreed to, and implemented, the recommendations we made in 23 cases, it is disappointing that in more than a quarter of these cases, the recommendations were not completed within the agreed timescales.

While I acknowledge the pressures councils are under, such delays only add to complainants' frustration and increase the chance of others being affected by the same fault. We share recommendations at the draft decision stage of our process and often propose a time period within which we expect any actions to be completed. It is important your Council engages fully with that process and is realistic in either confirming or seeking to negotiate the timeframe required to complete the actions.

We raised similar issues in last year's letter, so it is concerning that any efforts made to improve the situation have not yet resulted in improved performance. I, again, ask that you take action to improve the timeliness of your responses to our enquiries and review your processes and oversight of the remedy process. 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.

I note that your Council has volunteered to take part in the Code pilot. I would like to thank you for doing so and hope your authority finds it useful.

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

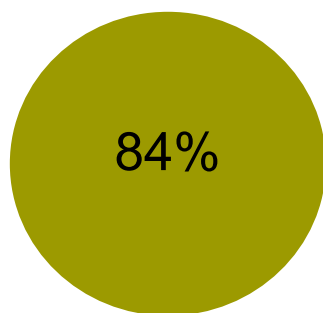
Returning to the theme of continuous improvement, we recognise the importance of reflecting on our own performance. With that in mind I encourage you to share your view of our organisation via this survey: <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/ombudsman/>. Your responses will help us to assess our impact 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amerdeep Somal' followed by a horizontal line.

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

Complaints upheld



84% of complaints we investigated were upheld.

This compares to an average of **79%** in similar organisations.

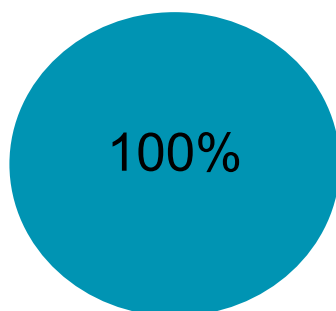
21
upheld decisions

This is 4.9 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents.

The average for authorities of this type is 4.6 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents.

Statistics are based on a total of **25** investigations for the period between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024

Compliance with Ombudsman recommendations



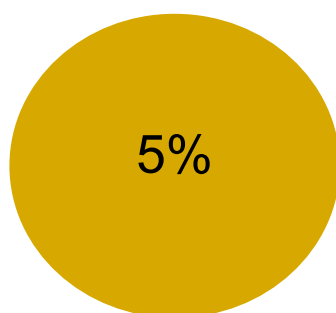
In **100%** of cases we were satisfied the organisation had successfully implemented our recommendations.

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

Statistics are based on a total of **23** 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 **5%** 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.

1
satisfactory remedy decision

Statistics are based on a total of **21** upheld decisions for the period between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024