



Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee
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Review of Local Government Ombudsman Report 2022

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Portfolio: Leader – The Economy and External Affairs

Ward(s) Affected: All

Purpose of the Report:

This report provides a summary of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman Report of complaints referred for the year ending 31 March 2022.

Recommendations:

1. That members note the contents of the report and provide any recommendations regarding the Council's approach to dealing with complaints.

1. Summary

- 1.1 The Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGO) investigates complaints about councils and some other authorities and organisations. The service is free, independent, and impartial. In general, a complaint can only be referred to the LGO once it has been through the organisation's own complaints process. The Ombudsman will investigate to see if there is any evidence of maladministration by the Council and make judgement.
- 1.2 The focus for the Ombudsman remains on what can be learned, and they have continued to make changes to improve data and focus statistics on complaints upheld, compliance with recommendations and satisfactory remedies provided by the authority. The LGO report of the complaints referred for 2021/2022 for South Norfolk Council has been published and the outcomes analysed to identify lessons to be learned and to implement any improvements in processes, procedures, or practice.

2. Background

- 1.3 In August 2021, we aligned the process and policy for handling complaints to create a robust and consistent way of handling complaints. Alongside this, we now track our customer satisfaction ratings through our online form and via our contact centre lines. Proactively reaching out to customers who have left feedback that needs attending to and resolving.
- 1.4 South Norfolk Council's policy for complaints is set out on the Council's website [here](#). The complaints policy follows two stages; Stage 1- is where the complaint is investigated and responded to by the Manager of the service and technical officers to which the complaint relates, and Stage 2 follows if the complainant remains dissatisfied with the response received. The complaint along with the stage 1 response is referred to the service Director, who reviews, and responds to the complainant. This concludes the Council's complaint process. Should the complainant remain dissatisfied having completed stage 2 of the Council's complaints process they can refer their complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.
- 1.5 The Local Government Ombudsman's role is to investigate to see if there is any evidence of maladministration by the Council and make a judgement.

3. Current position/findings

- 1.6 The table below shows the complaints about South Norfolk Council by service area that were referred to the LGO and the decisions made by The Ombudsman after investigation. Bracketed figures provide the comparison to 2020/21 findings.

	Benefit s and Tax	Corporate and Other Services	Environment Services	Housing	Planning and Development	Education & Children's Services	Total
Complaint Referred	1 (0)	0 (1)	5 (3)	1 (0)	6 (1)	1 (0)	14 (6)
LGO Decisions	Incomplete/ Invalid		1 Referred back for local resolution 2 Closed after initial enquires 1 Upheld 1 Not upheld	Referred back for local resolution	5 Closed after initial enquiries 1 referred back for local resolution	Not Upheld	

1.7 Our number of Ombudsman cases are much higher when compared to 2020/21. This is due to the Ombudsman not considering new or existing cases from March 2020 to June 2020 whilst in the first lockdown to alleviate Councils from additional burden therefore, the 2020-2021 is not fully representative of normal operating practice.

4. Risks and implications arising

1.8 Any complaint referred to the LGO and upheld has the risk of financial penalty being imposed by the Ombudsman. The Council endeavours to avoid this and considers this at Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the complaints process when a thorough investigation is undertaken.

1.9 The Council works hard to ensure that anyone making a complaint about any of our services will receive a full response and explanation. Complaints are regularly analysed to inform service improvements.

1.10 This reporting year we have had 1 complaint that the Ombudsman considered upheld, but the Ombudsman consider the Council had already provided a suitable remedy and no further remedy was to be provided.

5. Other options and comparisons with other Councils

1.11 The overall number of cases referred to the LGO for South Norfolk is very small.

1.12 Of the complaints investigated (3) 1 was upheld this compares to 51% in similar organisations in 2021/22. Since 2018, of the complaints investigated (9) we have had 3 upheld which is 33% of investigated complaints.

1.13 In 100% of upheld cases, we had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman. This compares to an average of 20% in similar organisations.

- 1.14 In 2021/2022 the LGO received 15,826 complaints and enquiries of these 11% were upheld cases where the Ombudsman agreed with the authority's remedy. 4,130 recommendations to remedy personal injustice, 2,231 recommendations to improve services for others; and 1,848 cases with recommendations to put things right.
- 1.15 South Norfolk Council continually takes learning from all complaints received not just those that have been referred to the LGO.
- 1.16 The One Team approach gives a more rigorous check on the handling of complaints from an early stage to try and alleviate escalations. Providing consistency of response and more opportunity for lessons learned to be shared across The One Team.

6. Recommendations

- 1.17 That members note the contents of the report and provide any recommendations regarding the Council's approach to dealing with complaints.