



Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee
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Review of Local Government Ombudsman Report 2023

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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 2023.

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 2022/2023 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

- 2.1 We have been working to an aligned process and policy for handling complaints since August 2021. This process and policy creates a robust and consistent way of handling complaints. In addition to a robust complaint handling process, we have continually improved the way in which we collect and act on customer feedback. A new customer satisfaction survey on both the website and telephone channels enables us to monitor customer satisfaction and identify service areas for improvement. We report and publish these results on a quarterly basis.
- 2.2 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.
- 2.3 The Local Government Ombudsman's role is to investigate the complaint handling process to see if there is any evidence of maladministration by the Council and make a judgement.

3. Current position/findings

3.1 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 2021/22 findings.

	Benefit s and Council I Tax	Corporate and Other Services	Environment Services	Housing	Planning and Development	Education & Children's Services	Other	Total
Complaint Referred	1 (1)	1 (0)	1 (5)	7 (1)	2 (6)	0 (1)	1 (0)	13 (14)
LGO Decisions	Referred back for local resolution	Closed after initial enquiries	Upheld	4 Referred back for local resolution 1 Closed after initial enquiries 1 Upheld 1 Not upheld	2 Closed after initial enquiries	Not Upheld	Incomplete /Invalid	

3.2 Overall our number of Ombudsman cases are fairly comparable when compared to 2021/22.

3.3 However, this does vary a fair amount by service area. We have seen an increase this year in Housing complaints escalated to The Ombudsman, and a decrease in the number of Environmental Services escalated. Although we have seen an increase in volumes, the number of investigated and upheld complaints is comparable.

4. Risks and implications arising

4.1 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.

4.2 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.

4.3 This reporting year we have had 2 complaints that the Ombudsman considered upheld. For the Environment Services complaint, the remedy recommended by the Ombudsman was "Apology Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble". The Ombudsman is satisfied that we completed the remedy. For the

Housing complaint the Ombudsman deemed that no further action was necessary as we had already provided a remedy.

5. Other options and comparisons with other Councils

- 5.1 The overall number of cases referred to the LGO for South Norfolk is very small.
- 5.2 Of the complaints investigated (3) 2 were upheld this compares to 59% in similar organisations in 2022/23. Since 2018, of the complaints investigated (12) we have had 5 upheld which is 41% of investigated complaints.
- 5.3 In 50% of upheld cases, we had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman. This compares to an average of 15% in similar organisations.
- 5.4 In 2022/2023 the LGO received 15,488 complaints and enquiries of these 12% were upheld cases where the Ombudsman agreed with the authority's remedy. 4,907 recommendations to remedy personal injustice, 2,412 recommendations to improve services for others; and 2,548 cases with recommendations to put things right.
- 5.5 South Norfolk Council continually takes learning from all complaints received not just those that have been referred to the LGO. Previous learning taken has enabled us to find fault in a process and make improvements, improve the level of communication with customers and remind officers of correct procedures.
- 5.6 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

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