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Ombudsman report suggests council complaints system under pressure

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) has warned that the complaints system in local government is under increasing pressure, in a new report.

The LGO's *Annual Review of Local Government Complaints* suggests that many councils are dealing with increasing numbers of complaints and have less resource available to manage them due to resources being cut in complaint handling teams.

The warning is also backed by research that found that, on average, people spent nine months trying to resolve their complaint before coming to the LGO, and 43% of people were not told that they could approach the LGO for an independent review.

The report also releases the LGO's data for the complaints it received in 2014/15. It registered 18,211 complaints and enquiries about councils, and upheld 46% of all complaints where it carried out a detailed investigation. Within its total number of complaints there was a 10% increase in adult social care complaints and an 11% decrease in complaints about benefits and tax.

The LGO also saw a small, but unprecedented, increase in the number of councils seeking to challenge its decision and failing to comply with recommendations to put something right for a complainant.

While councils ultimately have the democratic right to choose how to implement LGO recommendations, these few instances raise a question about how councils are held to account if they fail to comply with the recommendations of its ombudsman.

Local Government Ombudsman, Dr Jane Martin, said:

"Our findings point to a local complaints system that is under real pressure. Complaint handling teams are having to do 'more with less' and the process is not as accessible and timely as it should be.

"More investment into complaints, both in terms of resources and developing an open culture, is a good value way of driving service improvement – and local government needs to challenge itself on this question. Complaints must be seen as a positive. They can provide an early warning system for issues and are an indicator of public sentiment.

"We hope that by sharing our data and knowledge from complaints, we can help with this process by promoting local accountability for actions, and allowing better scrutiny of services."

The LGO is the final stage for complaints about councils, and can carry out a fair and independent review of people's complaints once the local authority's complaints procedure has been concluded.

The LGO is clear that complaint numbers on their own can only form part of the picture of how the complaints process is performing, and other factors such as outcomes and how organisations have learned from complaints are also crucial. A higher volume of

complaints, for example, does not necessarily mean poorer standards of service; it may indicate a council's open approach to listening to feedback and using complaints as early indicator of potential issues.

Along with local councils, as the Social Care Ombudsman, the LGO has jurisdiction for private care providers, as well as some other organisations. Data for these is not included in this report.