

17 July 2024

*By email*

Mr Halsey  
Chief Executive  
London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Dear Mr Halsey

### **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 two public reports about your Council.

The [first report](#) found fault because the Council delayed in assisting a complainant who had been served an eviction notice by their landlord. That failure to act meant the Council did not offer interim accommodation when it should have done, causing the complainant and his family months of uncertainty, worry, and the experience of being evicted. There was also a delay in accepting the main housing duty, which frustrated the complainant's statutory right to ask for a review of the suitability of the temporary accommodation provided, and which may have affected their priority on the housing register. We also found your Council did not apply the correct legal test when considering whether the complainant was in priority need and identified concerns about complaint handling.

We asked your Council to apologise to the complainant, reimburse avoidable court costs, and make a payment to recognise the avoidable uncertainty, worry and time and trouble caused. We also asked it to share a summary of the learning from this case, as well as the full report, with relevant staff to prevent recurrence of the faults identified.

The [second report](#) found six-month delays in dealing with housing register applications. Our investigation found the complainant's application was not only delayed, but failed to assess medical priority when the application was first made. In addition, the Council failed to inform of the right to a review of the decision on housing priority, delayed dealing with the review request and failed to consider whether the complainant's circumstances warranted a departure from its allocations policy when deciding what housing priority to award.

We asked your Council to make a payment to acknowledge the distress caused to the complainant. We also asked it to remind officers of the need to ensure they consider whether an applicant without local connection has housing needs when dealing with housing applications. In addition, we requested your Council review its template letters to ensure it notifies applicants of their right to seek a review of its decisions on their housing application.

We considered your Council's delays in dealing with housing applications could cause injustice to other applicants. So, we asked it to draw up an action plan to ensure applications are decided within eight weeks and to provide a quarterly report to the relevant committee to ensure democratic oversight.

Outside of these cases, it is disappointing to note that your Council failed to provide evidence it had complied with the recommendations we made in one complaint during the year. In that case, the Council failed to progress a statutory housing homelessness review it agreed to complete. Non-compliance with our recommendations is taken very seriously; it reflects extremely poorly on the Council and undermines residents' confidence that it is genuinely willing and committed to putting matters right when it has been at fault.

As a result, we opened a new investigation. We found further fault and asked you to make a further payment to the complainant and take action to identify and implement a way of ensuring actions agreed with us are progressed promptly.

Turning to wider remedy compliance, I welcome that your Council agreed to, and implemented, the recommendations we made in 23 cases during the year. However, it is disappointing that in 11 of those cases recommendations were not completed within the agreed timescales. It is particularly disappointing that this is the fourth year we have had to raise such concerns with your Council.

Overall, we have had significant concerns about your Council's liaison with our office during the year and I understand you have taken a personal interest in responding to those concerns during a constructive meeting with my Assistant Ombudsman. I hope your Council will continue to meet with us in the coming year to improve our experience of investigating complaints about your Council, and in turn deliver improvements for those making complaints to our organisations.

### **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](http://www.lgo.org.uk/training) or get in touch at [training@lgo.org.uk](mailto: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.

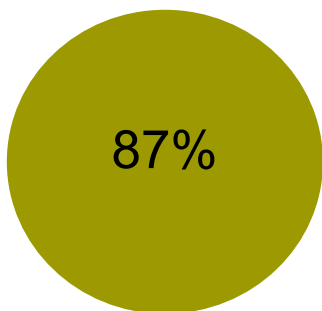
Returning to the theme of continuous improvement, we recognise the importance of reflecting on our own performance. With that in mind I encourage you to share your view of our organisation via this survey: <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/ombudsman/>. Your responses will help us to assess our impact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



**87%** of complaints we investigated were upheld.

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

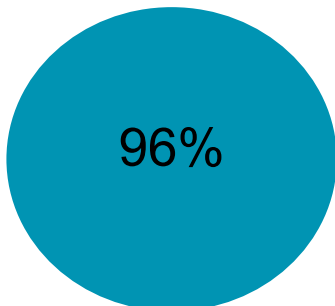
**34**  
upheld decisions

This is 10.4 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents.

The average for authorities of this type is 8.2 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents.

Statistics are based on a total of **39** investigations for the period between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024

### Compliance with Ombudsman recommendations



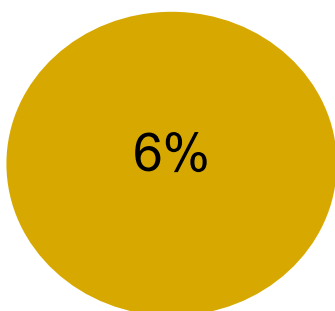
In **96%** of cases we were satisfied the organisation had successfully implemented our recommendations.

This compares to an average of **99%** 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 **6%** of upheld cases we found the organisation had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman.

This compares to an average of **12%** in similar organisations.

**2**  
satisfactory remedy decisions

Statistics are based on a total of **34** upheld decisions for the period between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024