

Our ref: NB/LG/MM



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28 July 2016

Sent by email

Dear Ms Morgan

Annual Letter 2015/16

Following the recent publication of my Annual Report I am pleased to provide you with the Annual Letter (2015/16) for **Ceredigion County Council**.

Overall my office's caseload has increased by 4% this year, but I am pleased to say that public body complaints fell by the same amount; only the second time in a decade this has happened. However, disappointingly the NHS in Wales was the only sector in my jurisdiction that saw a rise in complaints which now count for over a third of all public body complaints; a total increase of 51% in the last five years.

During 2015/16 we received 906 complaints against local authorities, down from 938 from the previous year.

In reference to outcomes there has been a large increase in the number of early resolutions and voluntary settlements achieved with local authorities with 81 cases in 2015/16 compared to 58 in 2014/15. I am committed to ensuring where possible, bodies from all sectors resolve complaints as quickly and effectively as possible and I am therefore pleased with these statistics.

My office has issued only one public interest report against a local authority during the past year – the same number as 2014/15. This related to failings around a council's failure to properly consider assess and identify the special educational needs of a primary school pupil.

Across all public bodies, after health (36%), housing is the second biggest area of complaint (13%) of our caseload, followed by Planning and Building Control (10%) and Social Services (9%).

The number of Code of Conduct complaints rose by 19% compared with 2014/15 (274 in 2015/16 against 231). It is disappointing to see this rise, although it is almost entirely attributable to community councils where there has been a 49% increase.

Last year I introduced a public interest test for code of conduct complaints and I am pleased to say this has helped my office in dealing with these complaints in an effective manner.

I am only too aware that we are in the run-up to the local elections where historically there is a spike in code of conduct complaints against local authority members. I have spoken previously about vexatious complaints and I would be most disappointed to see an increase in complaints of a trivial matter over the next 12 months when my office is dealing with issues of real concern across public services in my jurisdiction.

More generally my office is working in a number of ways to “turn the curve” of complaints against a backdrop of austerity and an ageing population.

During the past year, I introduced some staffing changes at my office; key amongst these was enhanced roles for a number of investigation staff to include ‘improvement officer’ duties. This places a greater emphasis on best practice, corporate cultural development, and ending cycles of poor service delivery. Whilst the new arrangements are still in their early days, I have been very pleased with the progress that has been made.

Whilst the ombudsman scheme in Wales is well respected at home and abroad, I feel strongly that we must ensure that it is future-proofed and citizen-centred.

I have been particularly pleased that the Finance Committee of the National Assembly for Wales agreed to undertake an inquiry into the powers of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales, and that a draft Public Services Ombudsman (Wales) Bill has resulted from this. I am now keen to see the Fifth Assembly take this bill forward and introduce it as legislation as soon as is practically possible.

You will find below a factsheet giving a breakdown of complaints data relating to your local authority along with explanatory notes.

This correspondence has been copied to the Leader of the Council for consideration by the cabinet. I will also be sending a copy to your contact officer within your organisation and would again reiterate the importance of this role. Finally, a copy of all annual letters will be published on my website.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Bennett', written in a cursive style.

Nick Bennett

Ombudsman

Factsheet

There was an increase in both the number of complaints received about your local authority and the number taken forward to investigation this year. Planning and Building Control was once again the area with the highest number of complaints with more than double the amount received by my office. It is also concerning that Children's Social Services has gone from having no complaints to being the second most complained about area. It is however pleasing to see a drop in the number of upheld reports issued although the time it takes to respond to my office's request for information needs to be addressed with 50% exceeding four weeks.

Improvement Officer Review

My Improvement Officer for the Authority has been warmly welcomed by the Senior Management Team and Officers dealing with complaints. In the wake of a disappointing year for complaints in 2014/15 the Authority has of its own initiative taken a decisive and pragmatic approach to Corporate Complaints which demonstrates the overwhelming desire to improve and learn lessons.

One of my Improvement Officer's first objectives was to gain a clear understanding of the organisation and its vision for the future of complaints. Through open and honest engagement they have been encouraged by the dedication of those dealing with complaints and the sincere drive to improve performance. As a result I have been able to identify some key areas for improvement and development. I am pleased to be in a position to work collaboratively with the Authority to create a "toolkit" to assist your officers when dealing with your own Corporate Complaints and those made to PSOW also.

Although this year's figures demonstrate that there is still opportunity for learning and putting things right, I am given confidence by the Authority's willingness to seek to resolve complaints made to my office at the earliest opportunity and the reduction in the number of investigations upheld when compared to last year. The number of complaints relating to Planning and Building Control continues to be an issue and the timeliness of responses to my office provides an opportunity for further development; however I am committed to seeking to support your officers to find ways to positively affect these outcomes in the forthcoming year.

Whilst your Authority may have been the first Local Authority in Wales to be allocated an Improvement Officer, this appointment has created the opportunity for meaningful and constructive engagement with my office. I am confident that the new Corporate Complaints approach will have a beneficial impact for the Authority and its service users. I think that the year ahead is very exciting for the Authority and I really look forward to continuing to work together in the continued development of the toolkit and in maintaining and building upon the improvements made in the last 12 months.

A) Comparison of complaints received by my office with average, adjusted for population distribution

In total my office received **38** complaints against **Ceredigion County Council** during 2015/16 compared to a local authority average of **22**.

B) Comparison of complaints by subject category with LA average

Subject	2015/16 Ceredigion	2015/16 LA Average
Adult Social Services	2	3
Benefits Administration	1	1
Children's Social Services	5	5
Communities, facilities, recreation and leisure	2	1
Complaints-handling	1	2
Education	2	2
Environment and Environmental Health	1	4
Finance and Taxation	0	2
Health	0	0
Housing	4	5
Planning and building control	17	9
Roads and Transport	0	3
Agriculture and Fisheries	0	0
Independent care providers	0	0
Various Other	3	3
Total	38	40

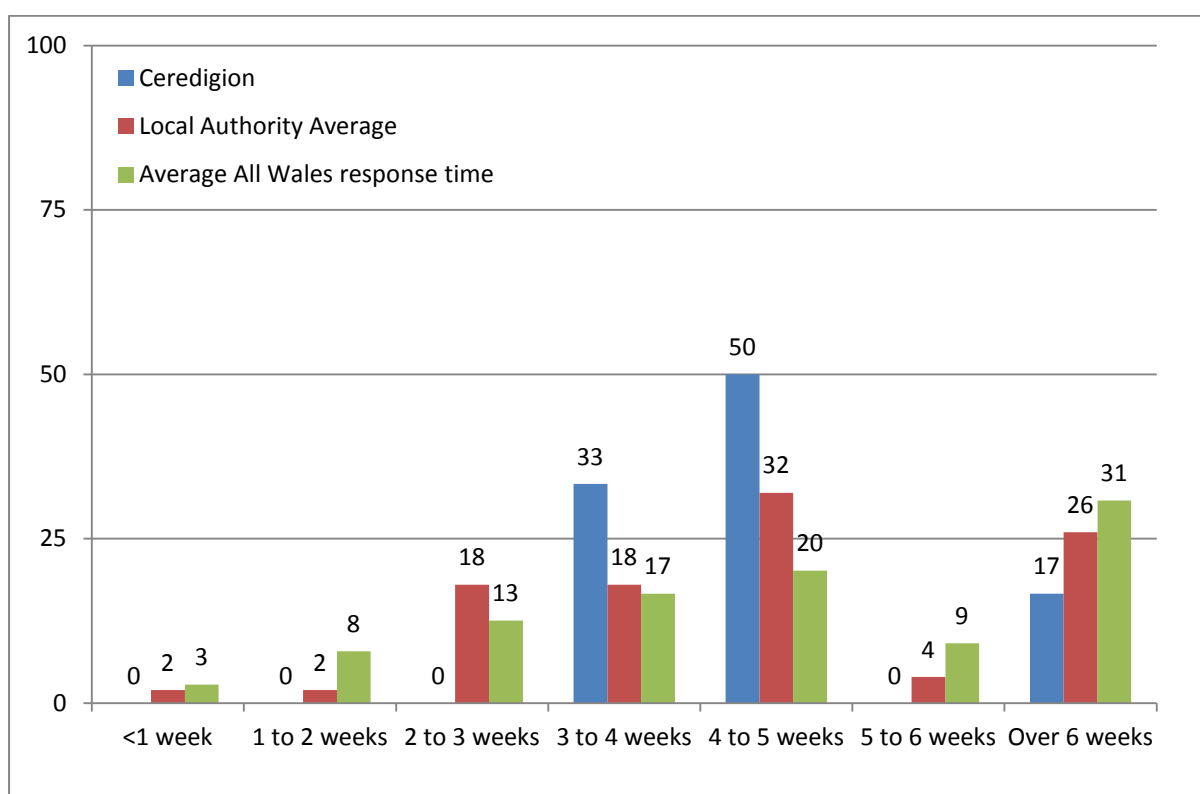
C) Complaints taken into investigation by my office with LA average

	2015/16 Ceredigion	2015/16 LA Average
Number of complaints taken into investigation	6	1

D) Comparison of complaint outcomes with average outcomes, adjusted for population distribution

Complaint Outcomes	2015/16 Ceredigion	2015/16 LA average
Out of jurisdiction	7	3
Premature	12	7
'Other' cases closed after initial consideration	6	9
Discontinued	1	0
Quick fix / Voluntary settlement	5	2
Section 16 – Upheld – in whole or in part	0	0
Other report upheld – in whole or in part	2	1
Other report – not upheld	0	0
Withdrawn	0	0

E) Comparison of Local Authority times for responding to requests for information with average for health bodies and All Wales response times, 2015/16 (%)



F) Code of Conduct complaints

There were no Code of Conduct complaints made against members of **Ceredigion County Council** during 2015/16.

G) Summaries

[Casebook 21](#)

201302469

[Casebook 22](#)

201500894

201502390

[Casebook 23](#)

201504254

201403291

[Casebook 24](#)

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Appendix

Explanatory Notes

Section A compares the number of complaints against the Council which were received by my office during 2015/16, with the Local Authority average (adjusted for population distribution) during the same period.

Section B provides a breakdown of the number of complaints about the Council which were received by my office during 2015/16 with the with the Local Authority average for the same period. The figures are broken down into subject categories.

Section C provides the number of complaints against the Council which were investigated by my office during 2015/16 with the Local Authority average (adjusted for population distribution) during the same period.

Section D compares the complaint outcomes for the Council during 2015/16, with the average outcome (adjusted for population distribution) during the same period. Public Interest reports issued under section 16 of the Public Services Ombudsman (Wales) Act 2005 are recorded as 'Section 16'.

Section E compares the Council's response times during 2015/16 with the average response times for all Local Authorities and all public bodies in Wales during the same period. This graph measures the time between the date my office issued an 'investigation commencement' letter, and the date my office receives a full response to that letter from the public body.

Section F provides a breakdown of all Code of Conduct complaints received against Councillors during 2015/16.

Finally, Section G contains the summaries relating to the Council appearing in the Ombudsman's Casebook during 2015/16.

Feedback

We welcome your feedback on the enclosed information, including suggestions for any information to be enclosed in future annual summaries. Any feedback or queries should be sent to lucy.geen@ombudsman-wales.org.uk or matthew.aplin@ombudsman-wales.org.uk