

Thousands of Complaints made to Local Authorities in Wales in 3 month period

Following the introduction of the Public Service Ombudsman (Wales) 2019 Act and the establishment of the Complaints Standards Authority, the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) has the power to set minimum standards of complaint handling for public bodies in Wales.

The work on Complaints Standards includes issuing model complaint handling procedures, providing free training on good complaint handling practice, and collecting information on complaints handled by public bodies themselves.

Local Authorities were the first Welsh Public Service bodies to be subject to Complaints Standards and, for the first time, PSOW is publishing the data it has collated.

The data shows that just over 4,300 complaints were received by Welsh Local Authorities in the first quarter of 2021/22; this is the equivalent of 5.57 complaints for every 1,000 residents of Wales. PSOW uses this type of representation to better compare public services which vary greatly in size.

The data shows that close to 78% of complaints which were closed in the first quarter of the year were done so within the target of 20 working days. This measure of performance is important to people who use complaints services and, whilst it is important that complaints investigations are conducted promptly, PSOW stresses that they should not be cut short simply to meet a target.

Local Authorities in Wales upheld roughly half of the complaints they closed. This figure shows how often complaints are found to hold some merit and can also lead to improvements in public service delivery. It is important to note that high uphold rates are not necessarily a sign of poor performance, but can be an indication of willingness to improve service delivery.

Just over 250 complaints relating to Local Authorities were referred to PSOW in the first quarter of the year, which represents about 6.5% of all complaints closed in the same period. This figure gives new context to both Local Authority complaints data and PSOW information – and could provide insight into how effectively complaints services function.

Finally, PSOW closed 99 cases related to Local Authorities in Quarter 1 of the year, with around a quarter of these cases being deemed within its jurisdiction to consider. Of the cases which acted upon, the vast majority (87.5%) featured an early resolution being made by the Local Authority involved. The remaining examples featured cases where an investigation was upheld against the Local Authority – meaning that PSOW intervened in 100% of available cases in the period.

Nick Bennett, the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales said, “I’m delighted with the excellent progress made in making use of the new powers, and we’re excited to public complaints data for the first time. These powers were several years in the making, and I’m grateful to all the public bodies who have engaged with my colleagues. This regular data publication will become an important source of information which raises standards, promotes collaboration, and drives improvement in public services. “

Matthew Harris, PSOW’s Head of Complaints Standards, said,

“We’re delighted to publish data submitted to us for the first time, and I’d like to thank our colleagues in Local Authorities across Wales for engaging so positively with our Complaints Standards work. Our quarterly data publications will drive transparency and consistency, as well as giving new context to what complaints performance means. I think we need to understand that high volumes of complaints don’t necessarily mean low quality services; just as low levels of complaints don’t always indicate good service provision. The information shown here needs to be the start of the story, with the end goal of all complaints processes being to deliver better public services – not fewer complaints.”