

THE LGO AND THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY

An LGiU Inquiry

Overview

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) is currently developing the future strategy for how they use their information to better inform local accountability. To aid this process, the LGiU carried out a consultation of the local government sector to find out how a better understanding of issues giving rise to complaints in local government can be harnessed to benefit public policy and service improvement.

The LGO covers a wide range of services including: planning, social care, housing benefit, transport and highways, environment and waste and council tax. In 2011/12, they received over 20,000 complaints and enquiries.

402 individuals responded to the survey, representing 232 councils. Of these, 26 were county councils, 137 were district councils, 20 were London Boroughs, 26 were metropolitan boroughs and 23 were unitary councils.

59 per cent of respondents were council officers, including chief executives, heads of legal, heads of democratic services and LGO Link Officers

39 per cent of respondents were councillors, including council leaders, opposition council leaders and chairs of overview and scrutiny committees.

We also had a small number of responses including from Members of Parliament and other representative groups of local government.

Key findings

The consultation identified some key headlines for the future direction of the LGO:

- There was significant support for the LGO among local government respondents. 91 per cent felt that local government benefits from having its own ombudsman. 92 per cent stated that the public benefits from having the Local Government Ombudsman.
- The broad consensus suggested that the current systems and processes were working. 88 per cent of respondents surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'local government has the right mechanisms in place to respond to complaints from service users'. 81 per cent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'members of the public have the mechanisms they need to hold the authority to account'
- The consultation highlighted strong demand for an increased information offer from the LGO. 70 per cent of respondents said they would find more focus reports helpful, and planning was highlighted as a key topic of interest. 77 per cent would like to see the LGO offer better access to the detailed data it holds on a wide range of complaints across local government.
- Elected members had an appetite for more direct support from the LGO. 48 per cent of all respondents felt that the work of the LGO could be used to support the work of elected members more widely, but 73 per cent of councillors surveyed wanted more support from the LGO.
- 31 per cent of respondents felt that the LGO should have a closer relationship with all government departments.

The LGO today: understanding and assessing its offer

In the first stage of our consultation, we wanted to understand how councils perceive the LGO in its current form: whether the LGO was regarded as a positive force within the local government sector; which functions local authorities found useful and which they found less useful.

What are the benefits of the LGO to local government?

To understand whether the LGO was perceived as a positive agent in local accountability, we asked council representatives two questions:

1. Do you think that local government benefits from having its own ombudsman?
2. Do you think the public benefits from having the Local Government Ombudsman?

With regards to local government, 91 per cent stated that the Ombudsman was beneficial. Only 2 per cent felt that having an ombudsman did not benefit local government, with a further 7 per cent saying they'd not know.

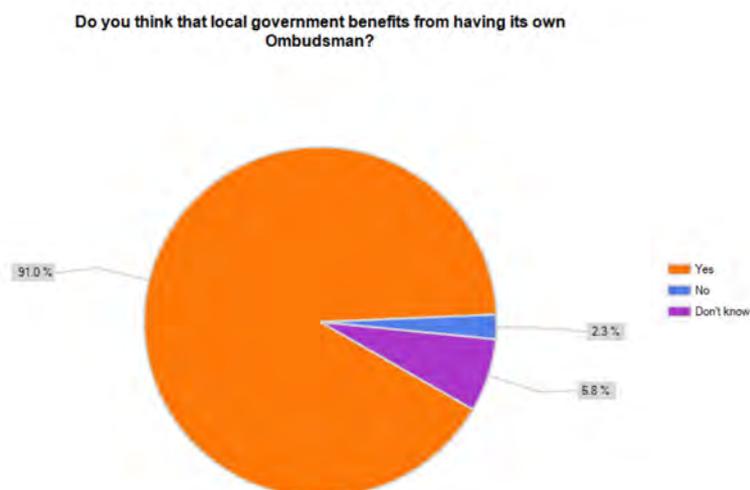
Explaining why they thought local government benefited from having its own ombudsman, council representatives highlighted the important role the LGO plays in enhancing transparency within the sector through its role as an independent arbiter.

“Local Government’s functions are so wide-ranging that it is important to have an arms length arbiter for complex cases that the Council cannot resolve with an individual.”

“The publication of all decisions provides transparency at a time of significant change across the public sector and is to be welcomed.”

The LGO’s local government expertise and knowledge was also emphasised by several respondents as crucial to the value of its insights and interventions.

“Having a good knowledge of local government, its practices and relevant legislation means that any advice provided is of good quality and is relevant. Having such knowledge will clearly also aid LGO investigators when carrying out their investigations into complaints about local government services.”



“It is very helpful for local government to have an independent arbiter that understands local government issues.”

“A shared ombudsman would have less local government specific knowledge.”

Not all, however, were in accordance with such sentiments:

“I think the role is important but wonder if given the increasing need to join up public services, there should not be an overarching public services ombudsman.”

The consultation also sought to question whether respondents felt the public benefited from having the LGO. Again, the large majority of respondents (92 per cent) felt that the public did benefit. Only 3 per cent disagreed with such a statement with a further 5 per cent stating that they did not know.

Respondents drew attention to the important role the LGO plays in enabling fair and just treatment of complainants. Again, the expertise and independence of the LGO was identified as important. The LGO was seen as playing a key role in protecting the rights of the citizen.

“It is important for complainants to have a clear place to go after completing the

Council’s own process. Having a well respected, independent organisation to go to provides the public with the reassurance that their complaint will be dealt with objectively and to identify a suitable remedy if appropriate.”

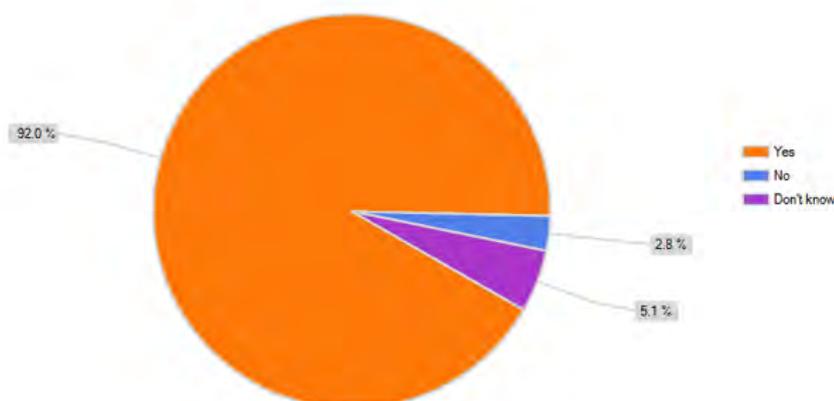
“The public must have this right to arbitration and common justice. People may not often use it but they should have the right to do so if required.”

“The knowledge of local government services that resides with [Ombudsman] staff is an immense help to complainants.”

“Members of the public with a grievance, justifiable or not, have the satisfaction of knowing an independent arbiter would ultimately consider their grievance if it remained unresolved and the fact that justice is seen to be done by the public both helps local government and general public satisfaction with local government.”

The last response demonstrates that the benefits the LGO offers to local government and the benefits the LGO offers to the public are often interlinked: the line of independent enquiry offered by the LGO to the public, in turn benefits local government by improving its image and accountability.

Do you think the public benefits from having the Local Government Ombudsman?



While the assessment of the LGO's role was broadly positive, some suggested that it should have a higher profile and greater powers of enforcement. Specific comments included the following statements.

"I think the public likes to know there is someone outside the Council to whom they can take their complaints. The snag is the LGO being unable to enforce decisions."

"The Ombudsman needs more powers, particularly to intervene when bad practice is happening."

"Not enough people are aware."

A subtle distinction between councillors' perceptions of the LGO and officers' perceptions of the LGO emerged in this area. While 95 per cent of officers think local government benefits from having its own ombudsman and 97 per cent of officers think the public benefit from its presence, councillors tended to place less emphasis on these benefits. A significant minority (16 per cent) of councillors did not agree that the LGO benefits local government, while 17 per cent disagreed with the question 'do

you think the public benefits from having the Local Government Ombudsman?'

This perhaps reflects the less direct relationship between the LGO and elected councillors in many authorities. Officers tend to have more frequent engagement with the Ombudsman, and this finding may suggest that councillors do not currently relate as easily to the LGO's offer as they might.

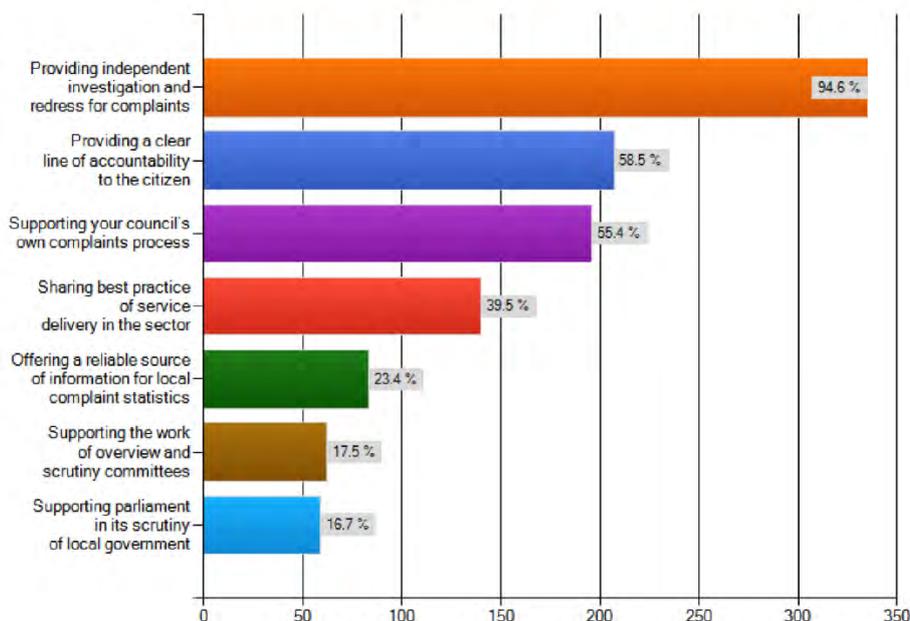
What are the most useful functions of an ombudsman?

To determine which functions councils valued most about the Ombudsman, we asked them to select which roles they perceived to be most of importance. The top three responses were:

- providing independent investigation and redress for complaints;
- providing a clear line of accountability to the citizen; and
- supporting your council's own complaints process.

'Providing independent investigation and redress for complaints' was the most

**In your view, which of the following are the most useful functions of an ombudsman?
Please check all that apply.**



frequent choice, with 95 per cent listing this as one of the most useful functions. Independence emerged as a key theme throughout the consultation, as the aspect of the LGO most valued by local government.

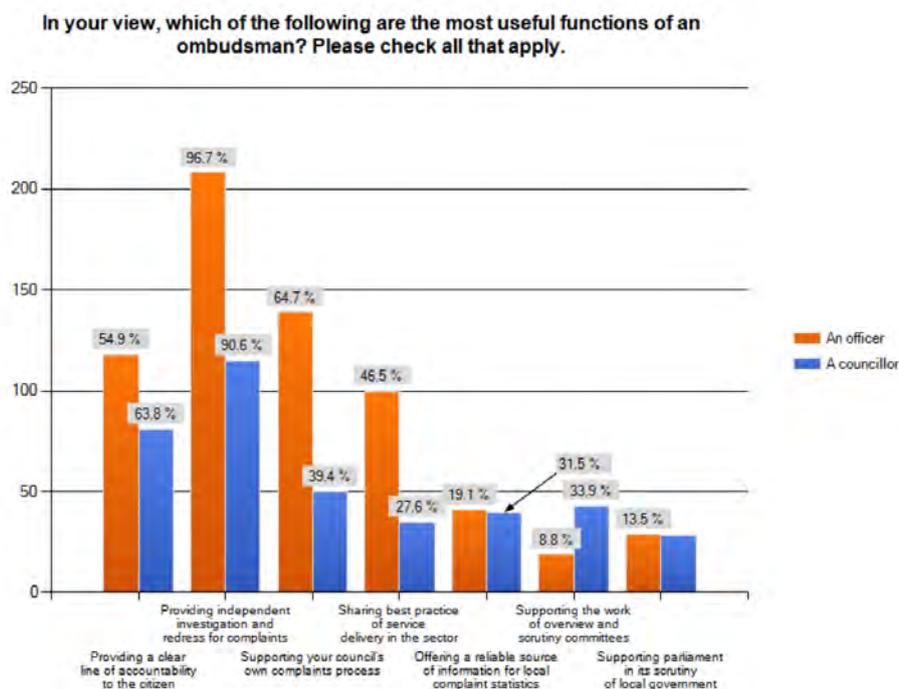
Two other functions were highlighted by the majority as being of particular importance. 59 per cent stated that 'providing a clear line of accountability to the citizen' was one of the LGO's most useful functions. This function was especially popular amongst councillors with 64 per cent highlighting this option in contrast with only 55 per cent of officers. This perhaps reveals their differing roles, with councillors typically more engaged with the representation of public concerns.

The other function highlighted as being of importance by the majority was 'supporting your council's own complaints process' with 55 per cent of council representatives

majority included 'supporting parliament in its scrutiny of local government' – only 17 per cent felt that this was one of the LGO's most useful functions. Likewise, only 18 per cent identified 'supporting the work of overview and scrutiny committees', although notably this option was significantly more popular amongst councillors with 34 per cent highlighting this function as important, compared with only 9 per cent of officers. Finally, 23 per cent said 'offering a reliable source of information for local complaint statistics' was one of the LGO's most useful functions.

While the latter functions proved less popular amongst respondents, this need not inherently undermine the importance of these functions. As one respondent commented:

"All its functions are important... the fact that some are not as important could imply that they have no value, which is not the case."



selecting this option. 65 per cent of officers highlighted this function as one of the most useful functions in contrast to only 39 per cent of councillors.

Functions deemed less important by the

To gain a further insight regarding the relative importance of the LGO's various roles, we asked respondents to name which functions they understood to be the most important and which functions they understood to be the least important.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its popularity in the prior question, the LGO's independent redress function was consistently highlighted as its most important function. Comments included the following.

"The most important [function] is the provision of an independent "appeal"/"review" mechanism for members of the public. It protects the integrity of the local authority when citizens make allegations of failure in the provision of services."

"Personally I think the most important role of the LGO is the role of being clearly independent of local authorities. This builds trust and confidence in the service from all parties."

"I believe the most important function of the LGO is that it is a free, independent service that provides redress for citizens."

"The most important is providing free and independent investigation and redress of complaints for citizens. That was what lay behind the foundation of the Ombudsman service in the LGA [Local Government Act] 1974. I believe it is as important today as it was then."

Regarding the function of least importance, respondents most commonly highlighted the provision of local statistical data. Respondents were unclear as to whether it added value to their own intelligence functions.

"The local statistical information is really just a duplicate of our own records."

"Probably the least useful is information about local complaint statistics as this has now become a case of wading through the website to find information about other local authorities. It used to be included in a table which made it very easy to check, it is much more time consuming now."

"Least importantly, it provides statistics on the level of complaints - which may need a lot of interpretation to extract any meaningful information in relation to any given area."

The LGO and the future of local accountability

One of the main roles of the consultation was to develop our understanding of local authorities' perception of the future of local accountability and how it can be enhanced. More specifically, we wanted to understand what future roles the LGO could perform, which functions of the LGO they would like to be developed and what other forms of support they would like to see.

Whilst most council representatives felt that we have the right mechanisms in place to deal with complaints, some common themes emerged as to how the LGO might best expand its offer. Respondents were particularly positive about the idea of a greater provision of comparative data, as well as the provision of more focus reports.

Responding to complaints: what mechanisms do we need?

Firstly, we sought to establish whether councils thought they had the right mechanisms in place to respond to both service users and members of the public and how they would like to see these developed in the future.

Most council representatives responded positively. 88 per cent of respondents surveyed said they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'local government has the right mechanisms in place to respond to complaints from service users'.

There was a disparity between officers' and

councillors' responses. 97 per cent of officers agreed or strongly agreed that local government has the right mechanisms in place to respond to complaints from service users'; however, a significant minority of 23 per cent of councillors disagreed with this statement. This perhaps reflects an elected member's closer relationship with dissatisfied complainants through their casework.

Council representatives were slightly less confident as to whether members of the public have sufficient mechanisms in place, although 81 per cent still agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'members of the public have the mechanisms they need to hold the authority to account'.

Officers again appeared more optimistic about the mechanisms in place, with 90 per cent officers agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement 'members of the public have the mechanisms they need to hold the authority to account' compared with only 63 per cent councillors.

To gain further insight, we asked respondents what mechanisms they would like to see developed in the future. One of the key themes to emerge was the value of an increased role for the public in holding councils to account. As part of this, respondents envisaged a

higher profile for the LGO to increase public awareness of its presence and its processes. Specific comments included the following:

"I would like to see improved mechanisms for the public to hold Councils to account however this is a much broader issue than simply complaint handling."

"Perhaps raising the Ombudsman's profile so that the public are more aware of their rights."

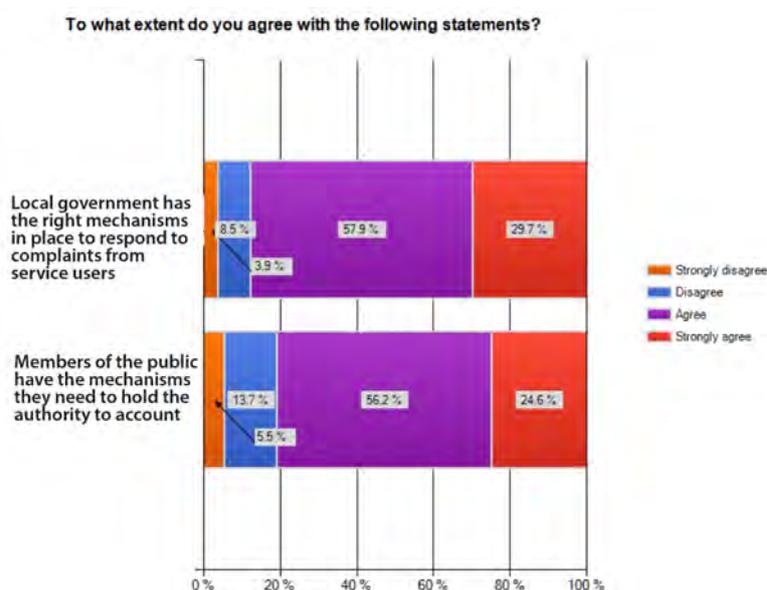
"I would like to see the LGO take on a slightly higher local public profile."

Respondents also suggested that the investigation into the complaints process could be clearer and further streamlined. Suggestions for improvement included the following statements:

"Quicker turnaround for investigation into complaints and more accountability for response times. Being more selective regarding complaints and ones which should be pursued."

"An expedited service responding quickly to complaints."

"Service users need to have clearer information on how the complaint structure in local authorities and the LGO relate."



They also need clearer information on the process of making a complaint, the difference between registering concerns and making an official complaint; the need to keep comprehensive information of all correspondence and how corresponding in writing might benefit them at a later stage."

Some suggested that the LGO should have greater power to enforce its own recommendations:

"The LGO needs to have more teeth"

"I should like to see the Ombudsman being legally able to enforce recommendations"

It is also worth noting that several respondents stressed that they were satisfied with the status quo. Comments included:

"I see little need for major change."

"As the system seems to be functioning effectively at present, I would see little need for radical change."

"I think the system at present has more or less the right balance between internal resolution and recourse to the Ombudsman."

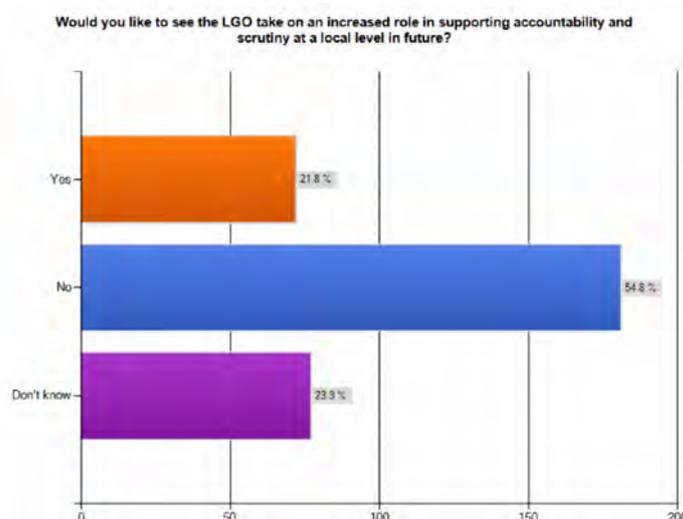
Supporting accountability and scrutiny at a local level

We asked councils whether they would like to see the LGO take on an increased role in supporting accountability and scrutiny at a local level in the future.

Whilst 22 per cent said that they would approve of this development, this proposition was predominantly met with scepticism: 55 per cent of respondents stated that they would not like to see the LGO take on an increased role, with a further 23 per cent stating that they did not know. Officers were especially hostile to such a notion. Only 14 per cent of officers said they would like to see the LGO take on an increased role in contrast to 36 per cent of councillors.

The principal concern was that an increased role could undermine local democratic accountability. There was also a sense that a greater role for the LGO and closer council involvement could potentially undermine the LGO's impartiality. Specific comments included:

"[L]ocal accountability should be paramount. It is hard to see how a stronger role for LGO would support this. Sharing best practice and providing comparative information can both be very helpful, but a more direct local role would not be appropriate."



"I think the confusion here between local democratic accountability and an unelected body would bring risks that outweigh the benefit. Where, for example, does that chime with Localism?"

"This could detract from the local accountability of Members who might depend on the LGO instead of undertaking the role themselves. I say "don't know" as my misgivings might in practice be unfounded."

"I believe the involvement by the LGO is at the correct level. Any further involvement would be seen as interfering."

"I think that closer involvement with day to day running of councils could impact on the perception of the Ombudsman's impartiality."

Some respondents were more positive about the notion of an increased role for the LGO in supporting accountability and scrutiny at a local level. For these, an increased role for a central arbiter was advantageous:

Others made it clear that they envisaged an increased role for the LGO in an advisory rather than a more interventionist capacity. Recommendations as to what this role might look like included the following.

"Advice to the scrutiny function on service delivery expectations and sharing of good practice. Consultee on issues of policy in relation to which the LGO has expertise or knowledge."

"Circulating learning points for councils based on complaints received"

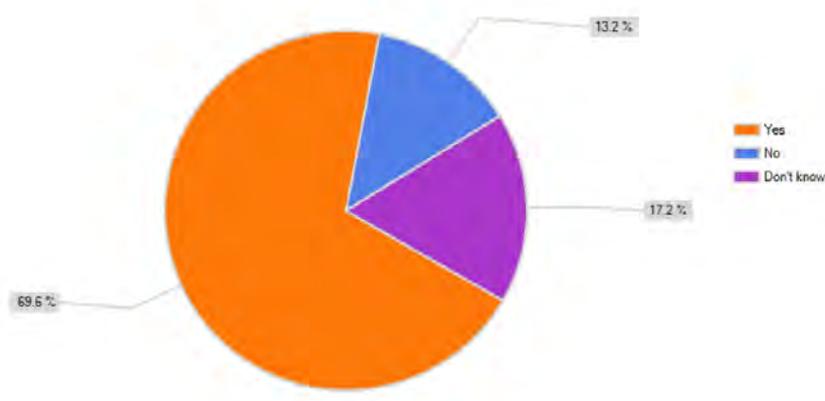
"Supporting high standards in local government / best practice examples"

Respondents suggested that the LGO could play a greater role as an 'expert witness' or a critical friend in order to enhance and improve local scrutiny and accountability.

Focus reports

Focus reports are themed publications investigating particular subjects of com-

The LGO publishes 'focus reports', which are themed publications investigating particular subjects of complaint in detail. They draw on the lessons learnt from complaints the Ombudsman has investigated and include recommendations on good practice. For example, they recently published a report on adult social care, to share the lessons learnt from complaints in that area. Would you find more focus reports helpful?



"Where one political party dominates decision-making and the executive do not appear to listen to the will of the people, it would be good to know such decisions could be scrutinised at a higher level."

plaint in details and are published by the LGO. They draw on the lessons learnt from complaints the Ombudsman has investigated and include recommendations on good practice. The consultation sought to establish whether council representatives would

find more focus reports helpful, and if so on what topics.

Responses suggested significant support for greater information of this kind. 70 per cent of respondents said they would find more focus reports helpful. A minority (13 per cent) said they would not, with a more significant minority (17 per cent) saying that they did not know:

"I have never seen such reports. I think all such reports should be copied to the Council's Monitoring Officer automatically."

This perhaps reinforces an emerging theme: that a number of council representatives do not feel that they are sufficiently aware of LGO's offer but are keen to learn more.

In terms of the preferred topics such focus reports should cover, planning emerged as the most popular – recommended by 53 of 166 respondents.

Other common suggestions included a focus report on housing benefit or housing strategy. Welfare reform represented another frequent recommendation – respondents anticipate that the impacts of the Welfare Reform Act will prove complex and would benefit from a focus report on this area specifically.

Highway maintenance, children's social care, education and waste management were also highlighted as issues of possible relevance.

Statistical data

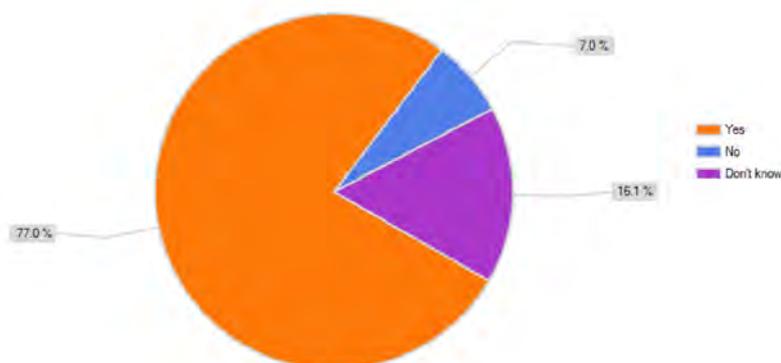
The LGO holds detailed data on a wide range of complaints across local government, including housing, planning, social care, transport, waste and council tax. We asked councils whether better access to this data would be of value.

A large proportion of respondents (77 per cent) said that would find such data of value. Only 7 per cent said that they would not find such data helpful.

We asked councils to clarify what sort of data they would find most useful. Whilst the provision of local statistical data was listed earlier as one of the least valuable functions of the LGO, there was a strong interest in obtaining comparative data via an accessible and easy-to-navigate online database. A number of respondents suggested that the provision of past cases organised thematically would be of great use. Suggested themes included according to local authority, type of authority or theme of complaint.

Specific suggestions included the following.

The LGO holds detailed data on a wide range of complaints across local government, including housing, planning, social care, transport, waste and council tax. Would better access to this data be of value to councils?



“A searchable database of decisions on complaints similar to those the authority is investigating.”

“Past cases and remedies provided would be very useful because this could be used for comparison of cases.”

“I think access to published decisions this year will be a good move forward, coupled with a search engine that will allow users and authorities to search by particular service areas. I think it would also be useful if the Ombudsman provided links to other authorities (liaison officer contact details) so that authorities could liaise between each other better. It was really useful to meet other authorities at the recent seminar, and I think the Ombudsman is ideally placed to support this closer working.”

“Being able to search by topic/keyword to find similar decisions and recommendations in order to assist any investigating officers and stage 3 panellists when they are considering matters. Also recommendations for remedies would enable more consistency across local government.”

“Any data highlighting factors such as socio/economic status and ethnic diversity will be useful to see where the complaints are coming from and how best to tackle issues affecting certain sections of the

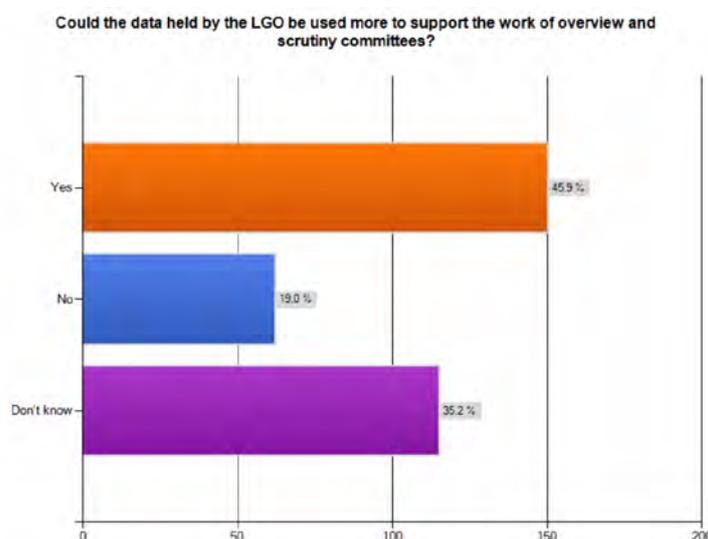
community. The findings will also enable the local authority to review whether its complaints procedure is fit for purpose and accessible to all customers. The data could also be used to review how well the local authority deals with complaints in light of the reductions exercise it is facing.”

“I am interested to see how BCC compares to other local authorities and therefore any data about their complaints would be useful to me.”

“It would be helpful to have comparative data which separates different types of authority (district/county/unitary). This would be useful in identifying whether certain services are generating concern when compared to other similar authorities.”

As one respondent explained, such data could be used to inform council strategy, highlighting best practice as well as potential pitfalls:

“Data that shows best practice. We should not have to reinvent the wheel every time something hits the fan. If it is being successfully dealt with elsewhere then find out about it and implement. Stopping the slippage and time wasting. Somewhere, a website, that is both easy to find and navigate.”



Could the data held by the LGO be used more to support the work of overview and scrutiny committees?

As part of the consultation, we sought to establish more specifically whether councils thought the data held by the LGO could be better used to support the work of the overview and scrutiny committees.

Nearly half (46 per cent) of all officers and councillors said that it could be used more to support the work of such committees. A substantial number of respondents (35 per cent) said that they did not know. 19 per cent felt that such data could not be used more to support these committees.

Councillors typically were more enthusiastic about using the LGO's data more to support the work of overview and scrutiny committees with 64 per cent affirming this statement positively.

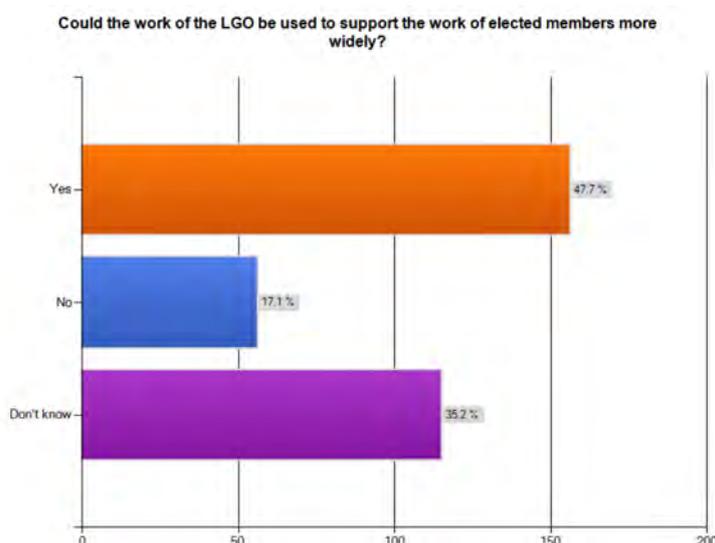
Those in favour of using the data more thought it could be used to identify best practice and to design benchmarks against which they could judge the standards of their own local authority. Specific comments included the following.

"As a member of such a committee it would be extraordinarily useful to glean facts from an impartial organisation."

"We need to know about best practice from other authorities and learn from their operations and such failures that bring them to the attention of the Ombudsman. As a Chair of an O&S panel, I am aware that our examinations tend to be locally focused and we could learn more from other authorities - as we indeed do, in certain studies."

"Data which helps us to form a view of good practice would assist with benchmarking and self-assessment and also inform our scrutiny lines of enquiry. Data could help us in holding the executive to account and questioning external organisations. It could also help inform our scrutiny work programming process and identifying. It is intended that next year 2013-14 one of scrutiny panels will consider the LGO's Annual letter at one of its meetings which could lead to further enquiries."

"When debating and reaching decisions, rather than 'inventing the wheel' it would be useful and helpful to hear how other groups have solved particular problems - possibly by means of a regular newsletter summarising the results of complaints made and how they were resolved."



Could the work of the LGO be used to support the work of elected members more widely?

Just under half of respondents (48 per cent) thought that the work of LGO could be used to support the work of elected members more widely. Whilst 17 per cent said they did not think that LGO work could be used to support elected members, a more significant minority of 35 per cent said they did not know.

A clear divide between councillors and officers emerged however. Taking the councillor responses alone, 73 per cent felt that the work of the LGO could be used to support the work of elected members more widely, compared with only 33 per cent of officers. One officer stated:

"I manage members services and I don't think the members would be interested."

This highlights that there are some critical differences in terms of how elected members and officers understand the current offer and how they perceive the role of the LGO can develop in the future. Councillors evidently perceive the potential for a more specific offer directed at elected members.

Again, the issue of awareness emerged. As

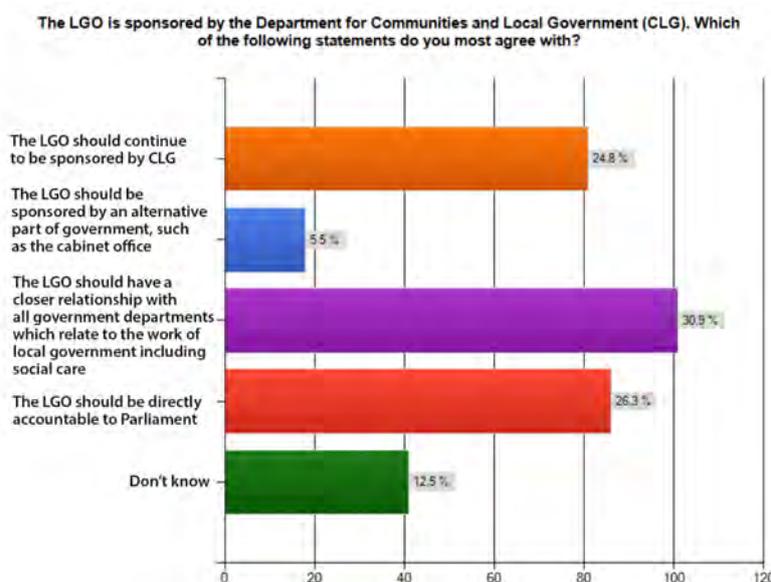
one respondent suggested, by raising the profile of the LGO and increasing awareness of its processes, elected members would be better able to take advantage of LGO support:

"I am sure many elected members know nothing of the detailed work of the Ombudsman and such knowledge would help them be more responsive to the needs of their constituents. It might also make them more proactive in heading off difficulties with officers before they get near a complaint to the Ombudsman."

"Better communication of the work you do would be beneficial and perhaps offering some kind of documentation re key issues to avoid"

Respondents also thought the provision of information and data-sets would be of use to elected members:

"More information/data sets on decisions taken by the Ombudsman on issues of wide interest and general application. This would enable councils to refer complainants to the likely outcome of taking their complaint to the Ombudsman, which in turn might reduce the number of new complaints (and hence the demand on resources)."



"Bite size summaries of bad committee decisions."

"Providing elected members with a portal into complaints handling."

"Perhaps presentations on your work giving Members the opportunity to say what they would like to best support them."

Sponsorship of the LGO

The final part of our consultation looked at the sponsorship of the LGO. The LGO is currently sponsored by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), and we sought to establish councils' views on this arrangement.

There was a lack of consensus regarding how the LGO should be sponsored, with no option receiving a majority. 31 per cent said that "the LGO should have a closer relationship with all government departments which relate to the work of local government, including social care". This was the most common response amongst officers with 30 per cent highlighting this option.

26 per cent of council representatives felt that "the LGO should be directly accountable to Parliament". This response was most popular amongst councillors with 37 per cent selecting this option. By contrast, only 22 per cent officers thought this was the most appropriate option.

25 per cent said that "the LGO should continue to be sponsored by CLG". Officers were slightly more positive about the idea of the CLG continuing to sponsor the LGO with 27 per cent of officers agreeing with this statement, as opposed to 19 per cent councillors.

Only 6 per cent of respondents chose to select the statement "the LGO should be sponsored by an alternative part of government, such as the Cabinet Office". A signifi-

cant minority felt unqualified to comment with 13 per cent saying 'Don't know'.

Whilst a quarter of council representatives said that the CLG should continue to sponsor the LGO, there was some concern about its role:

"The CLG comes across as being positively hostile to local government – and the LGO cannot be seen to be independent of that hostility as long as it reports in to that body."

"CLG does not enjoy the confidence of Local Government and the Cabinet Office is more likely to be seen as a 'honest broker'."

"To be effective the LGO should work across all government departments and not be sponsored by CLG."

31 per cent of councils said that the LGO should have a closer relationship with all government departments. Respondents explained:

"Local government is responsible for its decisions so a more broader approach to a understanding central government policy would be helpful to enable local government to deliver effectively to a broader agenda. This might allow a better understanding of what resources should be allocated to local government which would lead to a reduction in complaints."

"Nothing prevents the development of closer working relationships with Departments such as DOH, which would seem desirable."

However, 26 per cent of respondents thought that the LGO should be directly accountable to Parliament in order to be seen as fully independent.

"While it is important for the LGO to maintain effective links with all government departments, better to understand

the context and expectations placed by the departments on local government, it is more important to the community (and for the status and standing of the LGO) that it be seen as independent of 'government' and be accountable to Parliament."

"The Ombudsman role should be one that is part of the state not government, hence why Parliament should hold it to account as part of a wider service."

"In order to be seen as completely independent of the sponsoring for local government and its Ministers the LGO should be held directly accountable to Parliament. This would also act as a challenge to the Ministers in respect of any national learning."

General Comments

Other themes to emerge strongly from the general comments included a request for more power for the LGO:

"It is frustrating that the scope of the Ombudsman service is so limited. Often the only recourse to redress by the public is through judicial review and this is beyond the means of most small complainants. Many planning issues are not within the remit of the Ombudsman."

"It should take on a more Ofsted style role with the power to do spot checks and measure quality standards."

A number of respondents also took the opportunity to comment on the value they receive from the LGO.

"Having been in local government for 38 years, the last 13 as a director, I have valued the LGO. It has been more respected by relevant stakeholders than most other bodies - for example the inspection organisations. It is relatively rare for the LGO's judgments to be challenged by councils if the judgement finds against the Council."

"The Ombudsman is a "critical friend": working together, the Ombudsman and LAs can only improve service delivery."

"I have always thought that the Ombudsman's role as independent arbiter of complaints about local government is vital to open and accountable local democracy. It contributes to the satisfaction of citizens and their understanding of the functions or local government. The growth of other Ombudsman schemes reflects the value of the original one almost forty years after its inception. I would not like to see its role diminished in view of its importance to the public and to local government itself."

Conclusion

The high response rate to this survey suggests that local accountability, and the role of the LGO is a significant issue for local government at this time. Responses provided a helpful insight into the challenges and opportunities facing the local government sector as we seek to improve lines of accountability and determine how the LGO can best support this process.

The consultation revealed a diversity of views as well as some areas of common consensus. Some of the main themes that emerged were as follows.

Support for the LGO

There was a strong view among respondents that the LGO represents a positive influence both in terms of its impact on the local government sector and the public more broadly, with 91 per cent and 92 per cent respectively agreeing with statements to this effect.

Respondents also broadly agreed that we have the correct mechanisms in place both to respond to complaints from service users

as well as the public (with 88 per cent and 81 per cent affirming such statements positively).

Balance: the importance of the LGO maintaining its independence, while engaging positively with local government

The perceived independence and neutrality of the LGO was seen as a vital element of its relationship with local authorities. Respondents highlighted 'providing independent investigating and redress for complaints' as the most useful function of an ombudsman, and both officers and councillors referred repeatedly to the independence of the organisation as one of its core values to the sector.

Respondents displayed caution regarding the increased involvement of the LGO in the day-to-day activities of the council, as it was felt this could erode its independent status and potentially undermine local democracy; however, the prospect of an enhanced supporting role in the provision of information and focus reports was widely welcomed by survey participants.

Demand for increased provision of information

70 per cent of local authority representatives would like to see more focus reports from the LGO, with the issue of planning emerging as an important subject for participants. 77 per cent would like greater access to statistical data, enabling them to make thematic comparisons and learn about best practice.

The need for a distinct offer to officers and elected members

Consultation responses revealed some divergence of perspective on accountability from councillors and officers. Councillors were broadly very positive about the notion of an expanded and evolved role for the LGO. 73 per cent of elected members wanted more support for their work from the LGO, and 64 per cent felt that the LGO could help the work of overview and scrutiny committees. Officers did not perceive the need for this form of support to the same extent, but highly valued the LGO's capacity for independent investigation, and their ability to support the councils' own complaints procedures. This suggests that a more articulated and discrete offer to officers and councillors could be valuable, particularly with reference to the latter group.

In summary, respondents were clear that the LGO will play a crucial role in safeguarding the future of local accountability. While there was a broad sense that we have the correct mechanisms in place to address the complaints of services users and the wider public, responses demonstrated clear opportunities to enhance the LGO offer, particularly in relation to the provision of accessible and comparative data and information. There is also a need to develop a distinct offer to officers and elected members to reflect their different preferences. Such findings will inform the LGO's future strategy as they seek to improve how they use their information to better local accountability.

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