

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Sunderland City Council
for the year ended
31 March 2008**

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) provides a free, independent and impartial service. We consider complaints about the administrative actions of councils and some other authorities. We cannot question what a council has done simply because someone does not agree with it. If we find something has gone wrong, such as poor service, service failure, delay or bad advice, and that a person has suffered as a result, the Ombudsmen aim to get it put right by recommending a suitable remedy. The LGO also uses the findings from investigation work to help authorities provide better public services through initiatives such as special reports, training and annual letters.

Annual Letter 2007/08 - Introduction

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints received about Sunderland City Council and comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements.

I hope that the letter will assist you in improving services by providing a useful perspective on how some people who are dissatisfied experience or perceive your services.

Two attachments form an integral part of this letter: statistical data covering a three year period and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

Complaints received

Volume

Last year there were 40 complaints against the council, a fifth fewer than during the previous year (51).

Character

As in previous years the largest single category of complaints was about planning and building control. Last year there were 10 such complaints. There were five each about benefits, children and family services, and transport and highways services.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Last year the Council responded to enquiries made upon 15 complaints within an average of only 22.3 calendar days, a significant improvement upon the average of 28.3 calendar days during the previous year (2006/7). The Council is to be congratulated upon this achievement.

Decisions on complaints

Last year decisions were made upon 49 complaints. Of these 11 were premature complaints where the Council had not yet had a proper chance to deal with the complaint itself. Eight lay outside my jurisdiction and another 25 were closed either because no maladministration was found (15), or because I chose not to pursue my enquiries (10).

Reports and local settlements

We will often discontinue enquires into a complaint when a council takes or agrees to take action that we consider to be a satisfactory response – we call these local settlements. In 2007/08 the Local Government Ombudsmen determined 27% of complaints by local settlement (excluding 'premature' complaints - where councils have not had a proper chance to deal with them - and those outside our jurisdiction).

Last year there were five such complaints and three payments of compensation were made by the Council totalling £2550. In one case the Council failed to advise the complainants that an amended application for a Tesco shop and filling station had moved closer to their home and also ignored the fact in a committee report. In that case the Council paid and the complainant £1500. In another case the Council delayed in its provision of suitable accommodation to a disabled applicant so the complainant remained in an unsuitable nursing home for 14 months unnecessarily. In this case the Council paid the complainant £1000 for their distress.

If an investigation is completed I issue a public report.

Training in complaint handling

Part of our role is to provide advice and guidance about good administrative practice. We offer training courses for all levels of local authority staff in complaints handling and investigation. A detailed evaluation of the training provided to councils over the past three years shows very high levels of satisfaction.

I am pleased to note that last year the Council took advantage of four separate courses: one good complaint handling, one effective complaint handling and two effective care handling in social care. It is clear that those attending the courses were very positive both about my role and the part that they can play in handling complaints.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand. In addition to Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution) we now offer these courses specifically for social services staff and a course on reviewing complaints for social care review panel members. We will customise courses to meet your Council's specific requirements and provide courses for groups of staff from different smaller authorities.

Participants benefit from the complaint-handling knowledge and expertise of the experienced investigators who present the courses.

I enclose information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings.

LGO developments

We launched the LGO Advice Team in April, providing a first contact service for all enquirers and new complainants. Demand for the service has been high. Our team of advisers, trained to provide comprehensive information and advice, has dealt with many thousands of calls since the service started.

The team handles complaints submitted by telephone, email or text, as well as in writing. This new power to accept complaints other than in writing was one of the provisions of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, which also came into force in April. Our experience of implementing other provisions in the Act, such as complaints about service failure and apparent maladministration, is being kept under review and will be subject to further discussion. Any feedback from your Council would be welcome.

Last year we published two special reports providing advice and guidance on 'applications for prior approval of telecommunications masts' and 'citizen redress in local partnerships'. Feedback on special reports is always welcome. I would particularly appreciate information on complaints protocols in the governance arrangements of partnerships with which your Council is involved.

Conclusions and general observations

I welcome this opportunity to comment on our experience of complaints about the Council over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

**Anne Seex
Local Government Ombudsman
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June 2008

Enc: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

Complaints received by subject area	Adult care services	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Social Services - other	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	1	5	5	3	2	8	10	1	0	5	40
2006 / 2007	3	2	5	6	3	11	12	0	0	9	51
2005 / 2006	5	2	8	4	2	3	11	1	1	9	46

Note: these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Premature complaints	Total excl premature	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	0	5	0	0	15	10	8	11	38	49
2006 / 2007	0	7	0	0	9	4	2	19	22	41
2005 / 2006	0	6	0	0	13	5	8	12	32	44

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	15	22.3
2006 / 2007	14	28.3
2005 / 2006	11	29.5

Average local authority response times 01/04/2007 to 31/03/2008

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District Councils	56.4	24.6	19.1
Unitary Authorities	41.3	50.0	8.7
Metropolitan Authorities	58.3	30.6	11.1
County Councils	47.1	38.2	14.7
London Boroughs	45.5	27.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	71.4	28.6	0.0