

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Newcastle 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 Newcastle 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

During the year I received 111 complaints against the Council a figure which shows a rise of some 35% when compared with the previous year. The Council will wish to note the rise in complaints concerning both housing matters [46 up from 35 in 2006/2007] and local taxation matters [13 up from 3]. These increases are not significant enough to enable me to pass meaningful comment but the Council may wish to reflect on possible reasons behind these increases to ensure that no trends are emerging to cause either the Council or me difficulties in the future.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

I ask all authorities to respond to my initial enquiries within 28 calendar days. The Council took, on average, 28.1 days to reply to my enquiries this year and I commend the Council for the improvement shown since last year. I am aware of the difficulties an authority as large as Newcastle has in co-ordinating replies to my enquiries but it is clear to me [most obviously from the fact that some replies have reached me in as little as 5 days] that the Council makes every effort to respond to my enquiries very quickly. I am grateful to the Council for its efforts in this regard.

Decisions on complaints

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). If an investigation is completed I issue a public report.

I issued no report against the Council this year.

Other findings

I determined 100 complaints against the Council during the year a figure which differs from the number of complaints sent to me because of work in hand at the beginning and end of the year. Of these complaints 38 were sent to me prematurely while 4 were outside of my jurisdiction. In 15 cases I exercised the general discretion available to me not to pursue the matter and in 27 cases I found no evidence of maladministration. The Council agreed to settle 16 complaints acknowledging that something had gone wrong and recognising that the complainant was deserving of some form of remedy. I am grateful to the Council for the willingness it showed during the year to settle complaints.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

Three of the complaints settled during the year had in fact been considered by the Council through its internal complaints procedure. The fact that I found evidence of maladministration in these cases makes me wonder if the Council's internal complaints procedure is as robust as it might be. I pose the question and ask the Council to reflect upon it.

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.

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
Beverley House
17 Shipton Road
YORK
YO30 5FZ**

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	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	2	4	3	2	46	24	10	13	7	111
2006 / 2007	1	3	0	3	35	20	11	3	6	82
2005 / 2006	4	8	0	2	24	18	16	8	10	90

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	16	0	0	27	15	4	38	62	100
2006 / 2007	0	16	0	0	21	9	9	31	55	86
2005 / 2006	1	10	0	0	30	12	8	24	61	85

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	31	28.1
2006 / 2007	32	36.7
2005 / 2006	36	20.4

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