

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Northumberland County 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 Northumberland County Council and comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements.

As a result of the Secretary of State's decision on the future structure of local government in Northumberland, this is the last annual letter that I shall be sending to the Council in its present form. I should like to take this opportunity of thanking all the members and officers who have dealt with my office for their courtesy and cooperation and to wish them well for the future.

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 18 complaints were received, confirming the downward trend from 2005/06 when there had been 29 complaints.

Character

Complaints about education fell by 50% from eight to only four last year. On the other hand complaints about planning and building control rose from only one to four last year.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

The target set for responses to first enquiries made upon complaints in recent years has been 28 days, and 44% of county councils achieve this target. Last year the Council responded to the first enquiries made upon eight complaints within the target, taking an average of just under 25 calendar days to respond.

Decisions on complaints

Decisions were taken upon 21 complaints last year, eight of which were premature complaints, where the Council had not yet had a proper chance to deal with the complaint itself. Three lay outside my jurisdiction, and a further seven I chose not to pursue either because no maladministration was found or because I exercised my discretion to cease my investigation.

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 and those outside our jurisdiction).

Last year three complaints were settled in this way, and payments totalling £1,470 made to two complainants. Both concerned the care of adults. In one case the Council failed to act upon a referral from another council for three months; delayed appropriate adaptations for eight months; and communicated poorly throughout the process. In the other case the Council failed to provide alternative therapies required by a care plan for an unacceptably long period.

If an investigation is completed I issue a public report. I did not issue any reports about the Council last year.

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	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	3	3	4	0	1	4	3	18
2006 / 2007	2	2	8	0	5	1	4	22
2005 / 2006	2	3	7	1	11	0	5	29

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	3	0	0	5	2	3	8	13	21
2006 / 2007	1	8	0	0	4	3	4	6	20	26
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	3	3	8	7	17	24

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	8	24.9
2006 / 2007	11	29.3
2005 / 2006	7	25.7

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