

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

As a result of Secretary of State's decisions on the future structure of local government in Durham 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 co-operation and wish you 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

During the year I received 13 complaints against the Council a fall of 14 when compared with the 27 received in the previous year [30 having been received during the year before that]. I would draw no conclusions from such small numbers.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

In my annual letter last year I raised with the Council my concern about the time taken to respond to my initial enquiries set against a request to let me have such comments within 28 calendar days. I asked the Council to respond to complaints on just 5 occasions during the year but, on average, the Council's response took 51.6 days to reach me. On no single occasion did the Council meet the 28 day target. I recognise the improvement when compared with the 70.8 days taken in the previous year but I am bound to say that the performance of the Council in this regard is poor and reflects badly upon the commitment of the Council to good customer services.

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 reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

During the year I determined 23 complaints, a figure which differs from the number of complaints sent to me because of work in hand at the beginning of the year. Of these complaints 5 were premature while 2 were outside of my jurisdiction. In one case I exercised the general discretion available to me not to pursue the matter and in 8 cases I found no evidence of maladministration by the Council.

In 7 cases the Council agreed to settle the complaints acknowledging that something had gone wrong and that it was appropriate to offer the complainant some form of remedy. My investigators made notes in a number of these cases recording the positive attitude and co-operation shown by the Council's liaison officer and I commend the Council for this. It is unfortunate that this level of co-operation was not replicated by the Council in terms of the speed of the responses sent to me.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I have referred to my concern about the time taken by the Council to respond to me but I have no evidence to suggest that the Council was equally tardy in responding to those people who complained directly to the Council. What I would say though is that those complaints that did reach me and were settled by the Council had been considered previously by the Council, and it begs the question as to whether the Council's internal complaints procedure is as robust as it needs to be. The Council might wish to reflect upon this.

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. 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	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	2	4	1	5	0	1	13
2006 / 2007	0	11	5	10	0	1	27
2005 / 2006	0	15	7	7	1	0	30

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	7	0	0	8	1	2	5	18	23
2006 / 2007	0	3	0	0	6	3	1	8	13	21
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	11	5	2	8	18	26

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	5	51.6
2006 / 2007	9	70.8
2005 / 2006	19	30.7

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