

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Sefton Metropolitan 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

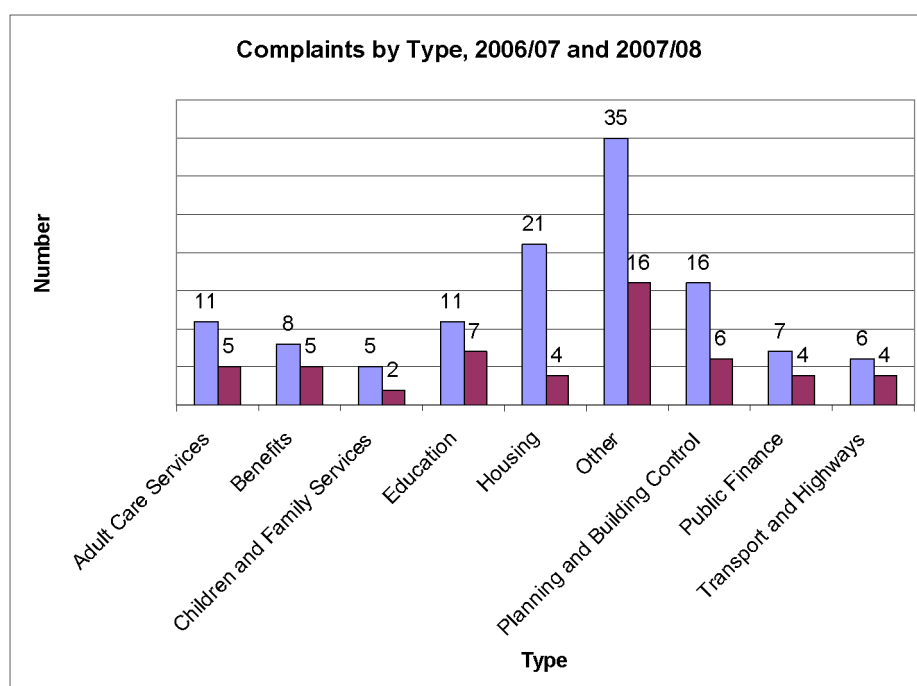
This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints received about Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council and comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements.

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

There has been a dramatic fall in the number of complaints about your Council in 2007/08 compared to 2006/07. The volume fell from 120 to 53. Part of this reduction is attributable to the Council transferring its housing stock and so having very few housing complaints.



However, as this chart shows, this is not the only area. Complaints received have fallen across all service areas.

This is very welcome and indicative of the effectiveness of the Council's positive and proactive approach to complaint-handling over the last 12 months.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Your Council's officers who liaise with my staff over general enquiries and complaint issues are helpful, approachable and provide timely responses to our initial enquiries. As the statistical information shows, the average response time has fallen from 35 days in 2006/07 to 24.6 in 2007/08. These times are very good and well within the requested 28 days. I thank your Council for its continued cooperation in this as it helps my staff reduce the time it takes to respond to complaints, ensuring a better service for our complainants.

Likewise, one-to-one contact with specific officers is generally constructive and positive as reflected in feedback from my staff. They have commented that officers have been '*...co-operative...helpful...responsive...proactive*' This is very welcome, as having a professional and constructive dialogue about complaints enables us to resolve them more effectively. This constructive dialogue has been at all levels, including between myself and your senior management and I look forward to this positive relationship continuing.

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.

As the attached statistical data shows, I did not issue any reports about your Council in 2007/8.

Of the 39 complaints I investigated, 11 were determined by local settlement. This proportion of 28% is comparable to the national average. These local settlements covered a range of service areas. None of these complaints raised concerns of widespread or systemic problems with Council processes. Nor were there any common themes, beyond delay in taking action. This suggests to me that faults we identified were isolated and specific to the complaints, rather than generic.

Other findings

In total, I made 69 decisions on complaints about your Council. This number differs slightly from the number of complaints received as it includes complaints received in the previous year. As you can see from the statistical information, 18 of these were premature, 12 were outside my jurisdiction and 18 resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

While my investigations have not highlighted general issues with the way in which your Council investigates complaints, I would ask one question that your Council may wish to consider in the context of data from its own complaints procedure - could any of the complaints that were made to me have been avoided had the Council given clearer or more comprehensive advice and explanations?

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
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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	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	5	5	2	7	4	16	6	4	4	53
2006 / 2007	11	8	5	11	21	35	16	7	6	120
2005 / 2006	3	11	0	6	28	21	16	2	7	94

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	11	0	0	18	10	12	18	51	69
2006 / 2007	0	37	0	0	30	11	10	41	88	129
2005 / 2006	0	14	0	0	17	12	11	17	54	71

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	20	24.6
2006 / 2007	42	35.0
2005 / 2006	39	21.9

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