

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Stockton On Tees 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 Stockton on Tees 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 48 complaints were received compared to the previous year, when 71 complaints had been received.

Character

While the largest single category of complaint remained planning, with 12 complaints, this saw a fall of nearly two thirds from the previous year's total of 34 such complaints. The drop in housing complaints also saw a continuous steady small fall from 13 in 2005/06 to 11 in 2006/07 and to nine last year. Complaints about transport and highways, however, saw marginal rises from four in 2005/06 to six in 2006/07 to eight last year.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Last year the Council responded to the first enquiries for 17 complaints within an average of just under 30 calendar days. The Commission's target for such responses is within 28 calendar days.

Decisions on complaints

Last year decisions were taken upon 57 complaints, just under a third of which (22) were premature complaint, where the Council had not yet had a proper chance to deal with the complaint itself. Nine complaints lay outside my jurisdiction, while in twice that number (18) I chose not to pursue investigations because, for example, no maladministration had been found.

Reports and local settlements

We will often discontinue enquiries 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 eight complaints were locally settled and £1,720 paid to four complainants. The largest payment was for £1,000 when there was a delay in starting major structural works to the complainant's home so that his family lived with bare walls and no carpets for over a year.

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
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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 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 10 | 8 | 12 | 2 | 8 | 49 |
| 2006 / 2007 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 11 | 9 | 34 | 2 | 6 | 71 |
| 2005 / 2006 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 13 | 10 | 20 | 2 | 4 | 59 |

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 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 13 | 5 | 9 | 22 | 35 | 57 |
| 2006 / 2007 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 16 | 8 | 16 | 21 | 52 | 73 |
| 2005 / 2006 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 10 | 5 | 19 | 39 | 58 |

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 | 17 | 29.8 |
| 2006 / 2007 | 15 | 28.9 |
| 2005 / 2006 | 27 | 35.1 |

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 |