

Local Government & Social Care OMBUDSMAN

9 July 2025

By email

Dr Paterson
Chief Executive
Northumberland County Council

Dear Dr Paterson

Annual Review letter 2024-25

I wrote to you in May with your annual summary of complaint statistics from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman for the year ending 31 March 2025. In that letter I explained that where we had concerns about your organisation's complaint handling or to highlight exceptional performance I would write again, and I have set out our experience of your organisation's complaint handling below.

As a reminder, [your annual statistics are available here](#).

In addition, you can find the detail of the decisions we have made about your Council, read the public reports we have issued, and view the service improvements your Council has agreed to make as a result of our investigations, as well as previous annual review letters.

This letter will be published on our website on 16 July 2025.

Your organisation's performance

I welcome that your Council agreed to, and implemented, the recommendations we made in 12 cases during the year. However, it is disappointing that in four of these cases the recommendations were not completed within the agreed timescales. Notably, in one case there was a five-month delay in carrying out a review of a disabled parking bay application, causing additional uncertainty and frustration for the complainant.

I encourage the Council to engage early in our process where there are concerns about the feasibility of proposed timescales for implementing recommendations. We are open to reasonable discussion at the draft decision stage, but once a decision is finalised, remedies must be completed on time. I invite the Council to review how it monitors and delivers agreed actions to prevent delays.

In last year's letter, I raised concerns about your Council's responses to our investigation enquiries, and it is disappointing we have experienced similar issues this year. There were ten cases where your Council was late in responding to our enquiries and in three of those the delays were such that we took the unusual step of threatening to issue a witness summons before we received the information we needed. This is not a step we take lightly. In addition to the delays, there were instances of poor-quality, incomplete responses, which meant my staff spent time chasing additional information. This is unacceptable.

I ask that you take action to improve responses to our enquiries; both in terms of timeliness and quality. It is important we are provided with the information we have asked for promptly, and that, where you

anticipate delays, you tell us and keep us informed. If there is any support my office can provide to help improve the situation, please do let me know.

Supporting complaint and service improvement

In February we published [good practice guides](#) to support councils to adopt our [Complaint Handling Code](#). The guides were developed in consultation with councils that have been piloting the Code and are based on the real-life, front-line experience of people handling complaints day-to-day, including their experience of reporting to senior leaders and elected members. We issued the guides alongside free [training resources](#) councils can use to make sure front line staff understand what to do when someone raises a complaint. We will be applying the Code in our casework from April 2026 and we know a large number of councils have already adopted it into their local policies with positive results.

This year we relaunched our popular [complaint handling training](#) programme. The training is now more interactive than ever, providing delegates with an opportunity to consider a complaint from receipt to resolution. Early feedback has been extremely positive with delegates reporting an increase in confidence in handling complaints after completing the training. To find out more contact training@lgo.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amerdeep Somal' followed by a horizontal line.

Amerdeep Somal
Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
Chair, Commission for Local Administration in England