

Local Government & Social Care OMBUDSMAN

9 July 2025

By email

Mr Lal
Chief Executive
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

Dear Mr Lal

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

It is disappointing to note that issues raised with the Council in previous years have been replicated again this year.

We have recorded delayed, incomplete, and poor responses to our investigation enquiries. This generates further work for us and the Council when we must follow up and chase for outstanding information.

There have been several instances where complainants have been incorrectly signposted to the Housing Ombudsman Service, wasting time and energy pursuing complaints with the wrong body. The Council should consider advising officers dealing with these cases to refer to [our guidance on signposting for housing complaints](#).

Delay has also been a concern within the remedy process, with four instances of our recommendations implemented outside of agreed timescales.

In one case, despite agreeing to produce an action plan to address the issues we had identified in a special educational needs (SEN) complaint, when asked to provide evidence, the Council said this was not necessary as matters were being addressed in the SEN improvement plan it was producing. We would not expect any council to replicate work if it is already being addressed via a different route, but this should have been flagged when the draft decision was issued and not left until we were chasing evidence of compliance after the final decision.

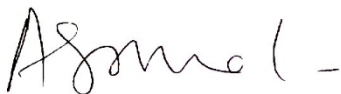
I ask you to consider what action is needed to ensure responses to our enquiries are on time and that compliance with recommendations is evidenced as agreed. If there is any support we can offer, please do let me know.

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