
ANNUAL LETTER OF THE OMBUDSMAN

Responsible Cabinet Member – Councillor John Williams, Leader

Responsible Director - Paul Wildsmith, Director of Corporate Services

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to refer to Members the Annual Letter of the Ombudsman in relation to complaints against this authority.

Summary

2. The letter is positive showing improvements in the speed of response and a fall in the overall number of complaints received against last year. There is, however, an increased number of complaints upheld although this is due to the number of complaints received on one particular issue which have been counted separately. The Annual Letter is attached at **Appendix 1**.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that:
 - (a) Cabinet welcomes the Annual Letter from the Local Government Ombudsman for 2008/9.
 - (b) Members note the improvement in response times and reduction in complaints and ask Directors to continue the strong performance in this area.
 - (c) Receive further reports on Ombudsman complaints to consider any action required during the year ahead.

Reasons

4. The recommendations are designed to ensure that where weaknesses are identified improvements can be made to the handling and management of complaints referred to the Local Government Ombudsman.

**Paul Wildsmith
Director of Corporate Services**

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Cath Whitehead : Extension 2306

S17 Crime and Disorder	This report is for information to members and requires no decision. It therefore there are no issues in relation to Crime and Disorder.
Health and Well Being	This report is for information to members and requires no decision. There are no issues in relation to Health and Wellbeing.
Sustainability	This report is for information to members and requires no decision. There are no issues in relation to Sustainability
Diversity	This report is for information to members and requires no decision. There are no issues in relation to Diversity.
Wards Affected	This report affects all wards equally.
Groups Affected	This report is for information to members and requires no decision. There is no impact on any particular group.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not recommend any change to the Budget or Policy Framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	This report contributes to our understanding of target NI 4, the number of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality.
Efficiency	Efficiency issues are highlighted in paragraph 9

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

5. The report sets out the details of the complaints handled by the Local Government Ombudsman in relation to this Authority during the course of the last municipal year.

Response Times

6. The chart in **Appendix 2** shows the response times for the Authority for the last three years, showing that the Council has responded to criticisms received in 2006/7 about the length of time it was taking to provide information to the Ombudsman about the complaints from an average of 35.8 days per complaint to 22.9 days. The Ombudsman comments:

‘I am grateful to the clear effort made by the Council to send me its responses so promptly’.

Complaint Outcomes

7. Although the Council received one maladministration report this year and eleven local settlement reports, in fact eight of these were of the same issue and the Ombudsman acknowledges this but indicates that the percentage of 45.8% is something the Council may wish to reflect upon.
8. The Council has been commended for the quality of some of the responses for the innovative solutions and openness of response.

Number of Complaints

9. The number of complaints received this year has fallen from 40 in 2006/7 and 45 in 2007/8 to 35 this year with only 19 of these being referred for investigation which is indicative of complaints being resolved within the Council’s own procedure but is also an efficiency saving since Ombudsman cases take a significant amount of officer time to deal with.

Breakdown of Complaints

Year	Adult Care	Benefits	Children and Family	Educating	Housing	Public Finance	Planning and BC	Transport and Highways	Other	Total
2008/9	1	0	2	1	5	3	9	5	9	35
2007/8	2	0	1	5	5	2	8	14	6	45
2006/7	5	4	3	4	9	0	7	2	4	40

Outcome of Consultation

10. There has been no consultation on this report.