

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

18 June 2008

Mr Peter Ollis
Chief Executive
Stevenage Borough Council
DX 6022
STEVENAGE 1

Our ref: TR/AL
(Please quote our reference when contacting us)

If telephoning contact: **Richard Shaw on 020 7217 4669**
email address: **r.shaw@lgo.org.uk**

Dear Mr Ollis

Annual Letter 2007/08

I am writing to give you a summary of the complaints about your authority that my office has dealt with over the past year, set out in the annual letter attached. I hope you find the letter a useful addition to other information you have on how people experience or perceive your services.


I would again very much welcome any comments you may have on the form and content of the letter.

We will publish all the annual letters on our website (www.lgo.org.uk) and share them with the Audit Commission. We will wait for four weeks after this letter before doing so, to give you an opportunity to consider the letter first. If a letter is found to contain any material factual inaccuracy we will reissue it. We will also publish on our website a summary of statistics relating to the complaints we have received and dealt with against all authorities.

I would again be happy to consider requests for me or a senior colleague to visit the Council to present and discuss the letter with councillors or staff. We will do our best to meet the requests within the limits of the resources available to us.

I am also arranging for a copy of this letter and its attachments to be sent to you electronically so that you can distribute it easily within the council and put the annual letter on your Council's website. This covering letter is not intended for publication.

Yours sincerely



Tony Redmond

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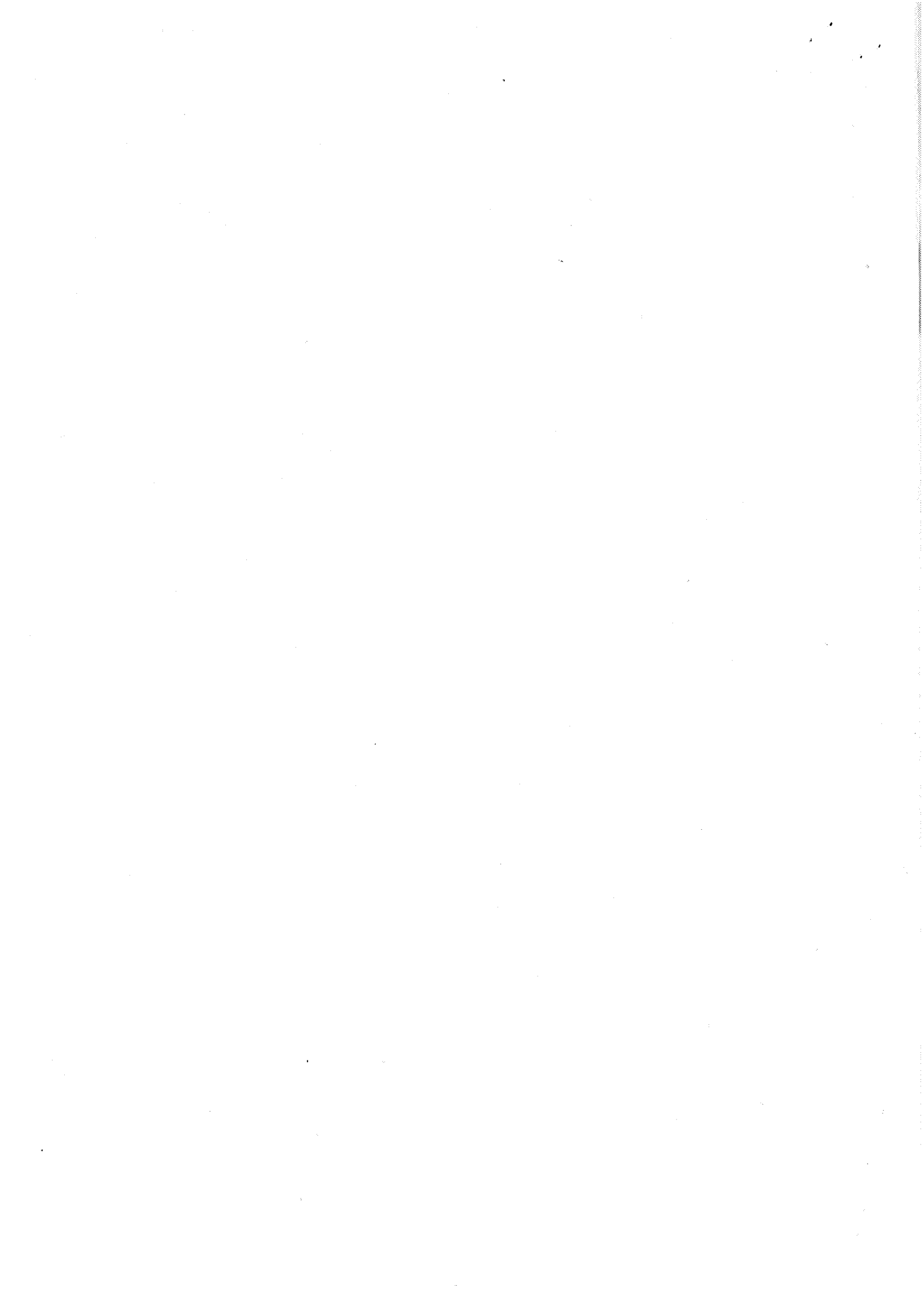
Tony Redmond
Local Government Ombudsman
Peter MacMahon
Deputy Ombudsman

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

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

Stevenage 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 we have received about Stevenage Borough Council. We have included comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements, where possible, so they can assist with your service improvement.

I hope that the letter will be a useful addition to other information your authority holds on how people 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

In 2007/08 I received 18 complaints against your Council, five more than in the previous year but fewer than in 2005/06. Complaint numbers inevitably fluctuate over time.

Character

Planning complaints were the most numerous: there were four complaints about planning applications (two from a complainant about the same matter) and two about trees. Housing was the next main area with four. Here, numbers have declined steadily in recent years. I am unaware of any underlying reason for this decline. Last year there were two each about housing allocations and housing repairs. Finally, there were three about housing benefit complaints and others about antisocial behaviour, land, employment, a wall and local taxation.

Decisions on complaints

During 2007/08 I made decisions on 20 complaints.

Reports and local settlements

A 'local settlement' is a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, the Council has agreed to take some action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint. The investigation is then discontinued. 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). None of the complaints we investigated this year justified the issue of a report. I did agree four local settlements. These concerned housing benefit, housing repairs, local taxation and trees.

In the housing benefit complaint I found that the Council had failed to explain its benefit calculations and had wrongly taken action against the complainant. The Council agreed to settle the complaint by providing the relevant details and offering to meet the complainant and his advisors. The Council also paid £100 compensation. I thank the Council for its promptness in settling the complaint.

A complaint about delay in finishing off works at the end of a major housing improvement scheme was settled by the Council paying the complainant £100 compensation. A complaint about council tax benefit was settled by the Council reviewing the complainant's claim and restoring some entitlement to benefit. Finally, a complaint about trees was settled by the Council engaging external contractors to implement previous recommendations made by a tree specialist to fell/lop various trees to prevent future possible damage to property.

Other findings

In two complaints I found no evidence that the Council was at fault and I used my discretion not to pursue an investigation into five other complaints. Six complaints were outside my jurisdiction. I sent three complaints back to the Council as I did not consider you had an adequate opportunity to consider and respond before I became involved.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

I ask councils to reply to my enquiries within 28 calendar days. Your Council's average response time was 43 days which, as in previous years, was outside my target response time. But for a planning response taking just six days, the outturn would have been significantly higher. The response time on one housing allocations complaint took 88 days. I do not consider this is acceptable. I should be grateful if the Council would let me know what plans it has to address problems in this area.

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. This year we carried out a detailed evaluation of the training with councils that have been trained over the past three years. The results are very positive.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand. In addition to the generic 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 can run open courses for groups of staff from different smaller authorities and also customise courses to meet your Council's specific requirements.

All courses are presented by an experienced investigator so participants benefit from their knowledge and expertise of complaint handling.

I have enclosed some 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'. Again, I would appreciate your feedback on these, particularly on any complaints protocols put in place as part of the overall governance arrangements for partnerships your Council has set up.

Conclusions and general observations

I welcome this opportunity to give you my reflections about the complaints my office has dealt with over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

Tony Redmond
Local Government Ombudsman
10th floor, Millbank Tower
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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	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	3	4	4	6	1	0	18
2006 / 2007	0	7	0	3	1	2	13
2005 / 2006	2	9	6	3	0	1	21

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	4	0	0	2	5	6	3	17	20
2006 / 2007	0	3	0	0	4	1	0	4	8	12
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	3	3	3	7	12	19

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

Average local authority response times 01/04/2007 to 31/03/2008

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	4	43.0
2006 / 2007	7	43.4
2005 / 2006	5	31.8

Types of authority	<= 28 days %			29 - 35 days %			> = 36 days %		
	District Councils	56.4	24.6	19.1	41.3	50.0	8.7	58.3	30.6
Unitary Authorities	47.1	38.2	14.7	45.5	27.3	27.3	71.4	28.6	0.0
Metropolitan Authorities									
County Councils									
London Boroughs									
National Park Authorities									

Notes to assist interpretation of the LGO's local authority statistics 2007/08

1. Complaints received

This information shows the number of complaints received by the LGO, broken down by service area and in total within the periods given. These figures include complaints that are made prematurely to the LGO (see below for more explanation) and that we send to the council to consider first. The figures may include some complaints that we have received but where we have not yet contacted the council.

2. Decisions

This information records the number of decisions made by the LGO, broken down by outcome, within the periods given. **This number will not be the same as the number of complaints received**, because some complaints are made in one year and decided in the next. Below we set out a key explaining the outcome categories for 2007/08 complaints.

MI reps: where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding maladministration causing injustice.

LS (local settlements): decisions by letter discontinuing our investigation because the authority has agreed to take some action which is considered by the Ombudsman as a satisfactory outcome for the complainant.

M reps: where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding maladministration but causing no injustice to the complainant.

NM reps: where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding no maladministration by the council.

No mal: decisions by letter discontinuing an investigation because we have found no, or insufficient, evidence of maladministration.

Omb disc: decisions by letter discontinuing an investigation in which we have exercised the Ombudsman's general discretion not to pursue the complaint. This can be for a variety of reasons, but the most common is that we have found no or insufficient injustice to warrant pursuing the matter further.

Outside jurisdiction: these are cases which were outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction.

Premature complaints: decisions that the complaint is premature. The LGO does not normally consider a complaint unless a council has first had an opportunity to deal with that complaint itself. So if someone complains to the LGO without having taken the matter up with a council, the LGO will usually refer it to the council as a 'premature complaint' to see if the council can itself resolve the matter.

Total excl premature: all decisions excluding those where we referred the complaint back to the council as 'premature'.

3. Response times

These figures record the average time the council takes to respond to our first enquiries on a complaint. We measure this in calendar days from the date we send our letter/fax/email to the date that we receive a substantive response from the council. The council's figures may differ somewhat, since they are likely to be recorded from the date the council receives our letter until the despatch of its response.

4. Average local authority response times 2007/08

This table gives comparative figures for average response times by authorities in England, by type of authority, within three time bands.