

For local authority chief executives and LGO link officers, and other authorities within LGO jurisdiction

# Local Government OMBUDSMAN

## LGO Link

Issue number 3, July 2008

Dear Colleague

Welcome to the third issue of this newsletter from the Local Government Ombudsmen, now being sent to chief executives as well as LGO Link officers, plus representative bodies including the LGA, Solace and ACSes. The last few months have been particularly eventful for us with the launch of the LGO Advice Team, the introduction of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the news that potential new legislation is likely to affect our jurisdiction. Like many local authorities, we also face serious budget issues over the next three years.

### LGO Advice Team update

Since its launch in April 2008, demand for the LGO Advice Team service has been far greater than expected. The team of 12 advisers, who provide a first contact service for all enquirers and new complainants, has dealt with many thousands of calls. The purpose of the new team is to increase access to our service and to provide a consistently high standard of information and guidance for all first contacts whether by telephone, letter, email or text. Our customer satisfaction research had shown that complainants wanted better and more timely information at the outset, and wider access to our service. Early feedback suggests that callers are pleased with the service we are providing. If demand continues at the current rate, the Advice Team would receive well in excess of 40,000 enquiries in 2008/09. The number for the LGO Advice Team is 0845 602 1983.

### No follow up to premature complaints

The Advice Team also deals with all 'premature' complaints ie where the council has not yet had a proper chance to deal with the complaint. They make the referrals to councils by email. Previously we followed up these complaints after 12 weeks by contacting the complainant and offering to consider their complaint further if it had not been resolved satisfactorily by the council. In order to focus on the first contact, the Ombudsmen have agreed that we will no longer follow up these premature complaints. This takes effect from 1 August 2008.

### Your feedback

It is too soon to carry out a full assessment of the new service as we do not yet know the extent of its impact on investigable complaints. However, we are carrying out a six-month review on the mechanics of operating the service so far. We would welcome your feedback on this aspect. Any general comments or suggestions should be sent to [name removed], Customer Services Unit Manager, by email to [email address removed].

Questions/comments about individual complaints already being investigated should continue to go to the relevant investigator/Assistant Ombudsman.

### **Service review**

In response to our budget cut – a 15 per cent reduction in real terms over the next three years – we are reviewing all aspects of our service. We have already made one significant decision which builds on the improved council complaints procedures we have seen over recent years. From April 2009, the Ombudsmen will only accept complaints that have been through all stages of a council's complaints procedure. For some councils this is already happening, but for the rest it will provide a greater opportunity to resolve complaints themselves before coming to the Ombudsman. There will of course be exceptions and we are considering very carefully what these might be. We will write to you again before next April, but if you have any views about the kind of complaints that should be treated as an exception to this procedure, please send them to [name removed], Deputy Ombudsman, by email to [email address removed].

### **Care self-funders announcement**

In a move welcomed by the Ombudsmen, the Government has announced its intention to extend the LGO's remit to include the investigation of complaints by people who arrange and fund their own adult social care services. It would give self-funders access to independent resolution of complaints in the same way as those whose care is funded by councils.

We are working with Government officials on the detail of the proposals, so it is not part of the current Health and Social Care Bill. The Government has said it is committed to introducing the necessary amendments at the next available legislative opportunity. It will require an amendment to the Local Government Act 1974, which defines our responsibilities.

### **News in brief**

- We laid our first annual report before Parliament on 16 July, as required by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. We welcome this as an opportunity to provide greater transparency to our work and accountability for the way we go about our business. Copies of the 07/08 report have been sent to all councils and it is on our website at [www.lgo.org.uk](http://www.lgo.org.uk)
- We also published the Annual Letters for every local authority in England on our website on 17 July. They are listed by A-Z in the 'councils' performance' section of the website.

- Copies of our new complaint leaflet, publicising the first contact service provided by the LGO Advice Team, have now been sent to all councils. The leaflet encourages potential complainants to phone an adviser before submitting a complaint. If the complaint is something we can consider the details can be taken over the phone instead of in writing. There is no complaint form in the new leaflet but the LGO website has an online complaint form. Bulk copies of the new leaflet are available through the publications order form on our website or by calling 020 7217 4683.
- Our Annual Liaison meeting with Solace, ACSeS and the LGA took place in June. The meeting provides an opportunity for us to give an update on our latest developments, such as LGO Advice Team progress and potential changes to our jurisdiction, and for these organisations and their members to give us feedback. We will circulate the date in advance of the next meeting.
- Rather than produce this newsletter on set dates throughout the year, we will send them out when there are important developments that we need to keep you informed about or where we would like your feedback on particular issues. We will add them to our website.