

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

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

Castle Morpeth 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 received about Castle Morpeth Borough Council and comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements.

As a result of the Secretary of State's decision on the future structure of local government in Northumberland, this is the last annual letter that I shall be sending to the Council.

I should like to take this opportunity of thanking all the members and officers who have dealt with my office for their courtesy and cooperation and to wish them well for the future.

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

14 complaints were received against the Council last year, a marginal reduction upon both of the two previous years.

Character

A significant majority of these complaints were about planning matters (11, as opposed to seven and five such complaints in the two previous years respectively).

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Enquiries were only made of the Council upon two complaints last year, and the Council responded admirably within an average of only 6½ calendar days – 20 days quicker than its responses to similar enquiries upon either complaints during the previous year. This speed is highly commendable upon the part of the Council.

Decisions on complaints

Decisions were taken upon 19 complaints last year, of which six were premature complaints, where the Council had not yet had a proper chance to deal with the complaint itself. Three complaints lay outside of my jurisdiction, and I found no maladministration in another seven cases.

Reports and local settlements

We will often discontinue enquires into a complaint when a council takes or agrees to take action that we consider to be a satisfactory response – we call these local settlements. 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). Last year the Council local settled three complaints, in one case paying the complainant £2,000 in compensation, having sold land in which the complaint had indicated an interest without allowing him the opportunity to purchase. The Council had then failed to inform the complainant of a planning application upon the same land, despite his occupying nearby land.

If an investigation is completed I issue a public report. This is my last opportunity to draw attention in an Annual Letter to the report I issued in March 2008 about the Council's failure to deal fairly and properly with a couple who bought a plot of land for a self-build home with high environmental standards.

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. A detailed evaluation of the training provided to councils over the past three years shows very high levels of satisfaction. We will customise courses to meet your Council's specific requirements and provide courses for groups of staff from different smaller authorities. Participants benefit from the complaint-handling knowledge and expertise of the experienced investigators who present the courses.

I enclose 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'. Feedback on special reports is always welcome. I would particularly appreciate information on complaints protocols in the governance arrangements of partnerships with which your Council is involved.

Conclusions and general observations

I welcome this opportunity to comment on our experience of complaints about the Council over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

Anne Seex
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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	0	1	1	11	0	1	14
2006 / 2007	1	5	4	7	0	2	19
2005 / 2006	0	5	6	5	1	0	17

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	3	0	0	7	0	3	6	13	19
2006 / 2007	0	2	0	0	4	3	1	7	10	17
2005 / 2006	0	6	0	0	2	2	1	5	11	16

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

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	2	6.5
2006 / 2007	8	26.1
2005 / 2006	5	23.8

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

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District Councils	56.4	24.6	19.1
Unitary Authorities	41.3	50.0	8.7
Metropolitan Authorities	58.3	30.6	11.1
County Councils	47.1	38.2	14.7
London Boroughs	45.5	27.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	71.4	28.6	0.0