

Local Government  
**OMBUDSMAN**

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
East Lindsey District 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 East Lindsey District Council and comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements.

I hope that the letter will assist you in improving services by providing a useful perspective on how some people who are dissatisfied 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***

I received 68 complaints about the Council in 2007/08. This is a drop of 18 on the 86 received the previous year. The volume numbers are too small to enable any meaningful commentary or conclusion.

### ***Character***

The number of complaints about planning matters remains the highest individual category. Of the 68 complaints I received, 40 were about planning matters and the majority of these about planning applications. Planning and building control complaints accounted for 59% of the total, 36% higher than the national figure of 23%. Every other category of complaint about the Council has shown a slight fall.

## **Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman**

I have some concerns about both the time taken to respond to enquiries and the quality of your Council's responses.

Our statistics record the average time taken to respond to first enquiries. This rose from 21.5 days in 2005/06, to 25.4 days in 2006/07 and to 34.3 days over 2007/08. My investigators tell me that the quality of information in responses is mixed, with some failing to provide the information asked for or to provide sufficient supportive detail and evidence.

It takes the Council 41.6 days on average, to respond to enquiries about planning complaints. For other types of complaints, it takes an average of just 18.6 days.

## **Decisions on complaints**

### ***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). If an investigation is completed I issue a public report.

I did not issue any reports about your Council in 2007/08 and had cause to ask for local settlements in only three cases.

## ***Other findings***

In total, I made 78 decisions on complaints about your Council. This number differs slightly from the number of complaints received as it includes complaints received in the previous year. As you can see from the statistical information, 36 of these were premature, six outside my jurisdiction and of the 36 substantive decisions, the majority (26) resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

## **Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints**

While the complaints made to me do not enable meaningful statistical analysis, the Council may wish to reflect on the fact that 20 of the 40 premature complaints were about planning and place this in the context of the complaints procedures and the data from its own complaint handling.

## **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  
Local Government Ombudsman  
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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	2	7	17	40	2	0	68
2006 / 2007	3	10	29	36	4	4	86
2005 / 2006	4	2	6	37	5	1	55

**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	26	7	6	36	42	78
2006 / 2007	0	6	0	0	24	12	9	29	51	80
2005 / 2006	1	2	0	0	13	6	2	19	24	43

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	23	34.3
2006 / 2007	24	25.4
2005 / 2006	18	21.3

**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