

Local Government  
**OMBUDSMAN**

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

**Harborough 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 we have received about Harborough District 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***

Twelve complaints were received against your Council this year, the same number as last year.

### ***Character***

As in previous years, complaints about planning and building control (ten) dominate. There were also single complaints about public finance and land.

## **Decisions on 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 some 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). When we complete an investigation we issue a report.

I issued no reports against your Council this year and there were no local settlements sought. I congratulate the Council on its performance here.

### ***Other findings***

Eleven complaints were decided during the year. Of these, five were premature and were referred back to your Council for investigation through its own complaints procedure.

One complaint was outside my jurisdiction and the remaining five were not pursued either because no evidence of maladministration was seen or for a variety of other reasons, mainly because no significant injustice flowed from the fault alleged.

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

This year premature complaints account for almost half the decisions made. This is far higher than the national average of 27%. I do not consider this to be particularly significant given the small number of complaints made against your Council, but you may wish to consider whether your own complaints process is sufficiently well advertised. No complaints were resubmitted to me during the year which indicates that your Council's complaints handling is robust and fit for purpose.

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

I made three enquiries of your Council this year, all about planning and building control matters. Your Council's average response time has improved from last year's figure of 33 days to 29 days this year. I am grateful for the efforts made here and I hope your Council will continue to work towards meeting my target of 28 days.

I was pleased to give a seminar in February of this year to officers of authorities in the Leicestershire region, which your Council kindly hosted. Your staff were most helpful in ensuring the event went smoothly. I hope those from your authority who were able to attend found it useful.

## **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 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, have 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'. 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.

**J R White  
Local Government Ombudsman  
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Coventry CV4 8JB**

**June 2008**

Enc: Statistical data  
Note on interpretation of statistics  
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

<b>Complaints received by subject area</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	0	1	10	1	<b>12</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	0	0	12	0	<b>12</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	2	1	11	0	<b>14</b>

**Note:** these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

<b>Decisions</b>	<b>MI reps</b>	<b>LS</b>	<b>M reps</b>	<b>NM reps</b>	<b>No mal</b>	<b>Omb disc</b>	<b>Outside jurisdiction</b>	<b>Premature complaints</b>	<b>Total excl premature</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	0	0	0	0	4	1	1	5	6	<b>11</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	0	3	0	0	6	3	2	1	14	<b>15</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	0	0	0	7	3	0	2	10	<b>12</b>

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

<b>Response times</b>	<b>FIRST ENQUIRIES</b>	
	<b>No. of First Enquiries</b>	<b>Avg no. of days to respond</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	3	29.3
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	7	32.6
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	11	26.1

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

<b>Types of authority</b>	<b>&lt;= 28 days %</b>	<b>29 - 35 days %</b>	<b>&gt; = 36 days %</b>
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