

Local Government  
**OMBUDSMAN**

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
Lichfield 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 Lichfield District Council. We have included comments on the Council'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***

We received 12 complaints against your Council during the year, four less than in 2006/07 and one less than the year before. We welcome this fall in numbers, but we expect to see these variations year on year.

### ***Character***

Six complaints were received about transport and highways and, like last year, largely concern disputes about parking tickets. Four complaints were about planning and building control (a slight increase of two from last year but nothing to cause concern) and in the 'other category', one complaint was about waste management and one concerned the way the Council had dealt with complaints about the complainant from his neighbour, who was a Council employee.

## **Decisions on complaints**

### ***Reports and local settlements***

When we need to complete an investigation we issue a report.

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).

There were no grounds to seek a local settlement and I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

### ***Other findings***

Eleven complaints were decided during the year. Of these, 10 were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen and in one I exercised my discretion not to investigate because no or insufficient injustice flowed from the fault alleged.

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

There were no premature complaints against your Council this year confirming what the previous years' statistics have suggested: namely, that the Council's complaints process is sufficiently visible to customers and that staff, when dealing with requests for assistance, signpost the complaints process for those who remain unhappy with what the Council has done.

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

We made enquiries on five complaints this year, two less than last year, and I am very pleased to see that the average time for responding has gone down from 35 days in 2006/07 to 26 days. This is now within our target time of 28 days and I welcome the Council's improvements here.

## **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 how useful you have found these reports, particularly on any complaints protocols put in place as part of the overall governance arrangements for partnerships involving your Council.

## **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 the Council's services.

**J R White  
Local Government Ombudsman  
The Oaks No2  
Westwood Way  
Westwood Business Park  
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>Benefits</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Transport and highways</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	0	0	2	4	0	6	<b>12</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	2	1	2	2	0	9	<b>16</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	1	2	8	1	1	<b>13</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	10	1	0	0	11	<b>11</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	0	1	0	0	13	0	2	2	16	<b>18</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	2	0	0	5	1	1	3	9	<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>	5	26.4
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	7	34.7
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	7	46.1

**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