

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
North East Lincolnshire 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 North East Lincolnshire 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

As the attached statistical information shows, I received 28 complaints from your Council in 2007/08. This is a slight fall on the previous year's 34. While the fall is encouraging, the numbers are too low to enable meaningful conclusions to be drawn from them.

The complaints were across a range of service areas, none of which have shown particularly dramatic rises or falls in complaints received.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

My office continues to enjoy a good relationship with your Council's liaison officer who is personally helpful and demonstrates great willingness to engage in meaningful and constructive communication with my staff. I am also aware that your liaison officer contacts my office for general advice about complaint handling, demonstrating a clear commitment to complaint handling.

As the statistical information shows, the average response time has fallen from 38.2 days in 2006/07 to 24 in 2007/08. These times are very good and well within the requested 28 days. I thank your Council for its continued cooperation in this as it helps my staff reduce the time it takes to respond to complaints, ensuring a better service for our complainants.

However, I raise a word of caution about quality of responses. While improvements in the timeliness of responses are always welcome, I urge your Council to ensure this is not at the expense of quality. For example, I urge your Council to consider whether there should be greater corporate commitment, shared by all officers, to provide comprehensive and thorough responses that fully address the questions my staff ask.

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. I determined three complaints by local settlement; none of these raised concerns about serious failings. However, some common themes that emerged from them (and other investigations) were:

- Y Failure to act on information or requests from complainants
- Y Poor record keeping
- Y Delays in responding to requests from complainants

Other findings

In total, I made 35 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, 11 of these were premature, four were outside my jurisdiction and of the 20 other decisions, 11 resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

While my investigations have not identified any specific issues with the way in which your Council deals with complaints, I urge you to reflect on complaint handling in light of the three general points raised above. In examining the detail of the three cases determined by local settlement, it seems to me that all three might have been resolved by your Council without the need for complaints to me.

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.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand. As you are aware from the range of training courses we delivered to your staff over the past few months, in addition to Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution), we offer courses specifically for social services staff and a course on reviewing complaints for social care review panel members. 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 hope that your staff enjoyed the courses and took a lot from them about complaint handling. I am aware that the trainers found them a very positive experience.

As a reminder of what we offer, 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	Adult care services	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Social Services - other	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	2	0	3	2	0	6	8	5	0	2	28
2006 / 2007	5	0	1	0	1	4	10	11	0	2	34
2005 / 2006	1	5	6	4	7	8	8	5	1	2	47

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	11	6	4	11	24	35
2006 / 2007	0	2	0	0	9	6	3	13	20	33
2005 / 2006	2	7	0	0	16	8	3	11	36	47

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	10	24.0
2006 / 2007	12	38.2
2005 / 2006	19	29.8

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