

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
North 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 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 data shows, I received 25 complaints about your Council in 2007/08. This is a fall of 18 on the previous year's 43. The complaints were about the full range of services, with planning and building control being the most numerous (11).

The numbers are too low for me to be able to draw meaningful conclusions from them but I encourage your Council to consider the information in light of data from your own complaint procedures.

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

On a personal level, my office continues to enjoy a positive and constructive relationship with your liaison officer whom my staff find to be approachable and helpful.

However, I have some concerns about wider contact within your Council. The time taken for responses to my enquiries has shown an improvement from 35.9 to 31.3 days between 2006/07 to 2007/08. However, the nature of responses originating from different departments is variable and not all departments give prompt comprehensive responses.

I accept that on the number of complaints I see, specific conclusions cannot be drawn, but I suggest that the Council would benefit from considering its corporate approach to complaint handling in general and to my enquiries in particular.

## **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. Of the complaints I investigated, four were determined as local settlements. Each of these was in relation to a different service area.

## ***Other findings***

In total, I made 37 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, 12 of these were premature, two were outside my jurisdiction and of the 23 other decisions, 12 resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

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

No specific issues have emerged about your Council's complaints procedure. However, I urge you to consider what lessons can be learned from the complaints that came to me and whether more effective communication from your Council might have reduced the number.

## **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. In addition to Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution), we now offer these 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 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	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	1	2	1	0	1	4	11	0	5	25
2006 / 2007	2	1	0	0	9	15	13	1	2	43
2005 / 2006	3	2	4	2	11	9	7	6	2	46

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	4	0	0	12	7	2	12	25	37
2006 / 2007	0	10	0	0	8	6	3	15	27	42
2005 / 2006	0	5	0	0	11	4	7	11	27	38

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	9	31.3
2006 / 2007	16	35.9
2005 / 2006	18	25.2

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