

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

**Rossendale Borough 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 Rossendale Borough 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***

As the attached statistical information shows, I received 23 complaints about your Council in 2007/08. This number is broadly comparable with the previous year.

### ***Character***

By far the greatest number of complaints continues to be in relation to planning matters which account for 70% of the total. I draw no conclusions from this as the numbers concerned are so low.

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

My office continues to enjoy a good relationship with your Council's liaison officers who provide timely responses to our initial enquiries. My staff find your liaison officers helpful and approachable, demonstrating a real commitment to service improvement and complaint handling.

As the statistical information shows, the average response time has fallen from 41.1 days in 2006/07 to 22.8 in 2007/08. These times are very good and well within the requested 28 days. The average would have been 17.7 days but for a planning complaint that took 69 days on which to respond. 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.

In addition to liaison about specific complaints, I was very pleased to attend a Council meeting to respond to questions about my report of 2006/07. One of my Assistant Ombudsmen also attended a Scrutiny Committee meeting for the same purpose. We found these meetings to be constructive and provided the opportunities for wider dialogue about complaint handling and service improvement. It was especially helpful because it was shortly after major changes to your own complaints procedures.

It also demonstrated a determination and commitment by your Council (members and officers) to continue to improve services and complaint handling.

## **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. Three complaints were determined by local settlement. These covered three different service areas. While I did not find evidence of major systemic failure,

two common themes emerged; poor initial complaint handling and poor communication. It is important that these are considered in the appropriate context. Two of the complaints were received in the previous year and so had not been through the Councils revised complaints procedures and since those complaints were received your Council has made significant changes such as revised procedures in your Planning Department. The third complaint determined by local settlement was more recent and raised no general issues to suggest it was anything more than an isolated case.

### ***Other findings***

In total, I made 18 decisions on complaints about your Council. This number differs slightly from the number of complaints received as it includes complaints currently still under investigation. As you can see from the statistical information, four of these were premature, one was outside my jurisdiction and of the 13 other decisions, six resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

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

The number of complaints I investigate about your Council is small and does not provide sufficient data for meaningful conclusions to be drawn. However, the feedback from the complaints I have investigated suggests that the new procedures are having a positive effect. This is something your Council may wish to consider in the context of its own complaint handling data.

## **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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17 Shipton Road  
YORK  
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**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	16	3	2	<b>23</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	0	4	2	15	0	2	<b>23</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	1	3	5	23	2	1	<b>35</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	3	0	0	6	4	1	4	14	<b>18</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	2	8	0	0	10	5	1	10	26	<b>36</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	6	4	0	0	4	4	5	4	23	<b>27</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>	10	22.8
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	11	41.1
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	13	52.0

**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