

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

We received just nine complaints during last year; a decrease from the 14 we received in 2006/07 and very similar in number to the eight complaints we received in 2005/06. As is not uncommon with District Councils the majority of the complaints made against your Council this year concerned its handling of planning applications. This accounted for six complaints. Of the remaining three, two were about Housing issues, and one other about Transport / Highways.

## **Decisions on complaints**

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 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).

None of the complaints we investigated this year justified the issue of a report, but there was one local settlement. The Council had already accepted that errors in the processing of a planning application had meant that it had misjudged the impact of a proposed development on a neighbouring property which had been devalued as a result. The District Valuer had already set out his view about the loss in value which should be paid and the complaint was settled by your Council making an additional payment of £250 to reflect the complainant's 'time and trouble'. This was a quick and positive response to the complaint to my office.

There were a total of 13 decisions made during the year and although seven of these were planning cases the only link between these, as I understand it, is that there were two different complaints from the applicant and a neighbour in relation to the handling of an application from planning permission for the development of one property.

We sent just three complaints back to the Council as we decided that you had not had a reasonable opportunity to look into them and respond before they were made to me. We found no evidence of fault causing significant injustice in the remaining nine complaints we decided.

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

You responded very quickly to our three requests for comments made during the year at an average of just 16.7 days. I am grateful to the Council for the priority it clearly affords to providing responses to my investigators' requests for information. This – in turn – enables us to provide timely decisions on complaints which we know those who complaint to us value.

/...

## **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 now offer these courses specifically for social services staff and a course on reviewing complaints for social care review panel members. 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, 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'. Again, 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. I would be particularly interested to learn of any such arrangements for the 'Home Option' joint choice based lettings scheme which the Council has entered into jointly with Epping Forest and Brentwood District Councils.

## **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.

**Tony Redmond**  
**Local Government Ombudsman**  
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**Millbank Tower**  
**Millbank**  
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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	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	0	2	0	6	1	9
2006 / 2007	2	0	2	9	1	14
2005 / 2006	0	0	1	7	0	8

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	1	0	0	5	4	0	3	10	13
2006 / 2007	0	1	0	0	6	1	0	6	8	14
2005 / 2006	0	2	0	0	4	0	1	1	7	8

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	3	16.7
2006 / 2007	8	29.8
2005 / 2006	2	27.0

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