

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

Last year 12 complaints were received against the Council, marginally fewer than in the previous year (nine), but only half the number (23) received during the previous year (2005/06).

Character

Two years ago the only significant category of complaint was about planning (11). It is gratifying to note that these have fallen to only one complaint last year about planning matters,

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Last year the Council deal with seven enquiries made upon complaints in an average of 28 calendar days, which is exactly the target period and is achieved by 57% of all district councils like Barrow.

Decisions on complaints

Decisions were made upon 12 complaints last year. Only one of these was a premature complaint, where the Council has not yet had a proper chance to deal with the complaint, though another four were found to lie outside my jurisdiction.

Reports and local settlements

We will often discontinue enquiries 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. I closed one complaint by local settlement last year, where the Council agreed to put in place a thrice yearly weed killing treatment and cutting along an allotment path.

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
Beverley House
17 Shipton Road
YORK
YO30 5FZ**

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 | Public finance | Transport and highways | Total |
|--|-----------------|----------------|--------------|--|-----------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|
| 01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 12 |
| 2006 / 2007 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 9 |
| 2005 / 2006 | 0 | 5 | 6 | 11 | 1 | 0 | 23 |

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 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 11 | 12 |
| 2006 / 2007 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 9 |
| 2005 / 2006 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 1 | 1 | 8 | 14 | 22 |

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 | 7 | 28.1 |
| 2006 / 2007 | 3 | 39.7 |
| 2005 / 2006 | 5 | 22.2 |

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 |