

Local Government  
**OMBUDSMAN**

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

**Cambridgeshire County 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 Cambridgeshire County 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**

### **Volume**

We received 36 complaints against your Council during the year, the same number as last year.

### **Character**

There was a small increase in complaints about education, from seven in 2006/2007 to ten. Complaints about children and family services doubled. However, complaints about transport and highways fell from 11 in 2006/2007 to six.

We received a similar number of complaints to previous years in the areas of adult care services and planning and building control.

One complaint was received about housing.

For complaints were received about other matters, which included complaints about land (2), leisure and culture (1) and waste management (1).

## **Decisions on complaints**

### **Reports and local settlements**

When we complete an investigation we issue a report. I issued no reports against your Council in 2007-08

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 some 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).

Six complaints were settled locally this year, and the Council paid a total of £1,380 in compensation.

In one complaint about housing repairs I criticised the Council for failing to take action to deal with damp in the complainant's property. This meant that he had to live in a damp property for two years longer than he should have done and was unable to use one of his bedrooms for 12 months. The Council agreed to pay the complainant £1,280.

In a complaint about education admissions I criticised the Council for failing to give the complainant seven days' notice of the Local Education Authority's case at an appeal against the refusal of a place

for his daughter at a particular school. This period is required by the school admissions appeals code. As remedy, the Council agreed to provide a fresh appeal with a new appeal panel.

In a complaint about highway's management I criticised the Council for failing to inform the complainant how he could pursue his concerns about traffic schemes which had been approved in the local area. The Council agreed to provide the complainant with details of how he could pursue a review of the schemes and agreed to pay £50 compensation as a goodwill gesture.

### **Other findings**

In four cases the matters complained of were outside my jurisdiction. The remaining 18 complaints were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them, mainly because no significant injustice flowed from the fault alleged.

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

Eight complaints were treated as premature and referred back to your Council so that they could first be considered through your complaints procedure.

Last year I suggested that the Council's complaint process was clear and accessible through the Council's website. That does not appear to be the case this year. I note that there are links to various complaints procedures for different Council departments on the Council's website but there is no direct link from the home page. It may be beneficial for the Council to provide such a link as this will improve the accessibility of its complaints procedure.

Three of the eight premature complaints were resubmitted to me. In two cases I decided there were no grounds to pursue the investigations because no evidence of maladministration was seen. The other case was discontinued because no significant injustice flowed from the fault alleged.

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

Enquiries were made on 16 complaints during the year. I ask councils to reply within 28 days. Your Council's average response time of 21.1 days is a small improvement on the already good response times achieved by your Council. Once again, the response time was affected by a complex case, involving a complaint about children and family services. The Council's response times remain very pleasing, and I am grateful for all your officer's hard work in this area.

I would particularly like to commend the Council on its response times for education admissions complaints. It is important that prompt responses are provided here therefore very often children are without a school place; I am pleased to see that in three of the six cases on which I made enquiries the Council responded within 16 days.

The Council sent a representative to our link officers' seminar last year. I hope that she found the seminar useful.

### **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, have 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'. 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.

### **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.

**J R White**  
**Local Government Ombudsman**  
**The Oaks No2**  
**Westwood Way**  
**Westwood Business Park**  
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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	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	5	8	10	1	4	2	6	36
2006 / 2007	7	4	7	0	6	1	11	36
2005 / 2006	2	4	2	1	4	2	5	20

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	6	0	0	9	9	4	8	28	36
2006 / 2007	0	6	0	0	12	1	4	10	23	33
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	5	3	6	6	14	20

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	16	21.1
2006 / 2007	21	23.3
2005 / 2006	5	12.4

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