

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Hambleton 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 received about Hambleton District 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.

This will be my last letter to the Council as my colleague Mr Redmond will be considering complaints about the Council from early 2008/09. I should like to take this opportunity of thanking all the members and officers who have dealt with my office for their courtesy and co-operation.

Complaints received

I received 18 complaints against the Council during the year which amounts to a very slight but insignificant fall from the 22 and 23 complaints received in the previous two years. Again complaints about planning and related matters constituted the largest single group of complaints but overall the numbers involved are too small to enable me to pass meaningful comment.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

I ask all authorities to respond to my initial enquiries within 28 calendar days. The Council, on average, took 28.2 days but this figure is distorted because one reply took 66 days to reach me. In every other single case the Council met or bettered the target time of 28 days. I am grateful to the Council for the effort it clearly made to ensure that its comments in response to complaints reached me in timely fashion.

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 issued no reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

I determined 21 complaints during the year a figure which differs from the number of complaints received by me because of work in hand at the beginning of the year. Of these complaints, 4 were sent to me prematurely while I decided in 5 cases to exercise the general discretion available to me not to pursue the matters. In 11 cases there was no evidence of maladministration by the Council.

The Council agreed to settle one complaint and indeed it had offered a remedy to the complainant before she complained to me. I commend the Council for reacting so positively in this case. I would refer to one other case which I did not pursue because of the absence of significant injustice to the complainant. However, in this case there were issues to address and the Council responded very positively and constructively following discussions with my office and agreed to visit the complainant, at least in part to attempt to rebuild confidence in the Council which had apparently been lost. This reflects well on the Council.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

No issues have arisen during the year to give rise to any concern about the way in which the Council handles complaints made to it by members of the public.

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
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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	Public finance	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	3	0	4	10	1	18
2006 / 2007	0	2	3	16	1	22
2005 / 2006	0	0	9	14	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	11	5	0	4	17	21
2006 / 2007	0	3	0	0	11	2	2	5	18	23
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	10	4	1	7	15	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	6	28.2
2006 / 2007	8	29.8
2005 / 2006	12	19.4

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