

Local Government  
**OMBUDSMAN**

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

**Huntingdonshire 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 Huntingdonshire 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**

### ***Volume***

We received 19 complaints against your Council during the year, a small increase on the 16 received last year. Fluctuations such as this are expected year on year.

### ***Character***

As in previous years the largest number of complaints related to planning and building control. This year we received 12 complaints about this category representing over 60% of all the complaints we received against your Council, slightly higher than in previous years.

We received two complaints about housing, two about transport and highways and one about public finance.

The remaining two complaints were recorded in the "other" category and related to miscellaneous matters.

## **Decisions on complaints**

### ***Reports and local settlements***

When we need to complete an investigation we issue a report. I issued no reports against your Council this year.

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).

One complaint was settled locally. The complainant alleged that an error in the measurements taken by planning officers resulted in the Council approving a building that it should not have done and which he considered significantly impacted on the value of his property. Your Council accepted that an error in the plans meant that they did not accurately reflect the relationship between the complainant's property and the boundary but the relationship between the boundary and the new development was accurately shown. I concluded that the complainant had been caused uncertainty about the Council's decision-making process but that your Council had not made a decision that it should not have done. Your Council agreed to pay compensation of £500 in recognition of the complainant's uncertainty and his time and trouble.

## **Other findings**

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

In four cases I took the view that the matters complained about were outside my jurisdiction.

The remaining four complaints were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them.

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

The number of premature complaints has increased considerably this year representing 50% of decided complaints. This is considerably higher than the national average of 27%. Last year I suggested that there might be benefits to the Council in improving the signposting of your Council's complaints form from the homepage of your website so that customers can find the online complaint facility quickly. I note that there are links to the complaints procedure included on the Council website but there is still no direct link from the homepage.

Only two of the premature complaints were resubmitted. I did not find maladministration in one of these cases and the other one is still under consideration.

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

We made enquiries on only two complaints this year and the average time for responding was 30 days against my target time scale of 28 days. This was slightly disappointing after last year's significant improvement in this regard and I trust the Council will aim to improve on this next year.

## **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 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 2008, 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 2007, which also came into force in April 2008. 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**  
**Coventry CV4 8JB**

**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	0	2	2	12	1	2	19
2006 / 2007	2	0	5	9	0	0	16
2005 / 2006	0	0	3	6	1	2	12

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	3	1	4	9	9	18
2006 / 2007	0	1	0	0	7	3	3	3	14	17
2005 / 2006	0	5	0	0	9	1	0	2	15	17

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	2	30.0
2006 / 2007	6	27.8
2005 / 2006	10	43.2

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