

Local Government  
**OMBUDSMAN**

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

**New Forest National Park  
Authority**

**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 an authority 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 the New Forest National Park Authority. 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 five complaints against your Authority this year, four fewer than last year all relating to planning and building control. Small fluctuations such as these are expected.

## **Decisions on complaints**

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

When we complete an investigation we issue a report. I did not issue any reports against your Authority this year.

A 'local settlement' is a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, the Authority 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).

In none of the complaints considered this year was a local settlement considered necessary.

### ***Other findings***

In total during the year, eight decisions were made regarding complaints made against the Authority; it should be noted that some of these decisions related to complaints made against the Authority in the preceding year but determined during this year. Of those eight decisions, one complaint was found to be outside my jurisdiction so I was unable to investigate it. In all the other seven complaints I found no or insufficient evidence of maladministration. This is clearly an encouraging picture and one both you and I would wish to see continue.

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

The Authority's own complaints procedure appears to be working well as evidenced by the relatively low number of complaints made to me and the fact that none of these was premature. However I do note that on your website there is no link to a general "how to complain" guide or indeed any information or link to the Local Government Ombudsman web site. This may be something you could consider adding in any future review and may further assist public accessibility to your complaints procedures.

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

Your Officers' response time to first enquiries has increased slightly from 27 days last year to an average of 29.3 days this year. The target is 28 days. While your Authority's performance in relation to timeliness is only just above the target, it is a little disappointing that your response time has increased, particularly given the low numbers we are dealing with. Your Officers should consider ways of improving efficiency over the 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 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 Authority'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, 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 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 Authority 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'.

## **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 Authority'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	Planning & building control	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	5	5
2006 / 2007	9	9
2005 / 2006	0	0

**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	0	0	0	7	0	1	0	8	8
2006 / 2007	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	3	4
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

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	4	29.3
2006 / 2007	1	27.0
2005 / 2006	0	0.0

**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