

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

**North Norfolk 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 North Norfolk 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 22 complaints during the year, fewer than half the number received last year (50). This has returned matters to the sorts of numbers of complaints received in previous years.

### ***Character***

Seven planning and building control complaints were received, representing a 77% reduction on last year's figure of 34. The remaining complaints were spread evenly across all areas of the Council's business.

## **Decisions on complaints**

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

When we 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).

Two complaints were settled locally. In a complaint about parking the Council failed to respond to an appeal against a parking ticket and so denied the complainant an opportunity to pay a reduced level of fine. The Council's parking contractor agreed to refund the difference between the lower and higher parking charges to remedy the fault.

The Council also failed to respond to complaints about the unauthorised felling of conifers by a developer. To settle the complaint, the Council negotiated an amended landscaping scheme to provide additional planting to screen the development.

### ***Other findings***

Of the 40 complaints decided this year, four complaints were treated as premature and referred back to your Council so that they could first be considered through your Council's complaints procedure.

Four cases were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. The remaining 30 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**

This year premature complaints account for a tenth of all complaints decided. This is well below the national average of 27%. None of these complaints was resubmitted.

Both these factors indicate that the Council has a well publicised, accessible and robust complaints system.

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

Enquiries were made on 12 complaints this year and the average response time was just under 26 days. This is well within our target of 28 days and represents a significant improvement compared to last year's average of 40 days. I am grateful to the Council's efforts in this area and congratulate it on its progress.

My officers have commented that your officers are helpful in responding to telephone enquiries and that the management of complaints from my office is efficient and effective.

I was pleased to be able to visit the Council in September last year and I hope elected Members found my presentation useful and informative.

## **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.

One of your officers attended our Complaint Manager's seminar in November 2007 and I hope she found this helpful and informative.

## **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**  
**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	2	1	6	7	3	3	22
2006 / 2007	2	3	9	34	0	2	50
2005 / 2006	1	2	6	16	0	1	26

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	2	0	0	10	20	4	4	36	40
2006 / 2007	10	4	0	0	15	4	3	7	36	43
2005 / 2006	0	2	0	0	7	3	2	2	14	16

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	12	25.8
2006 / 2007	22	40.3
2005 / 2006	18	34.2

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