

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

In 2007/2008 I received 19 complaints against your Council. This was a considerable decrease on the years before, when the total was distorted because of a large number of related complaints I received about a planning issue. The volume and nature of complaints received this year was a return to the general pattern seen in preceding years. As in previous years, most of the complaints (11) were about the planning service area.

Decisions on complaints

General comments

I made 22 decisions on complaints against your Council last year. In 11 cases I found no or insufficient evidence of maladministration to warrant my involvement. In another two cases I exercised my discretion not to pursue matters further because the level of injustice caused to the complainants did not justify further investigation. I was unable to consider two complaints because they fell outside my jurisdiction.

Reports and local settlements

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 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). As in the preceding two years, none of the complaints we investigated this year justified the issue of a report. Three complaints were discontinued on the basis of local settlements.

In one complaint, concerning planning enforcement at an industrial site, it came to light that the Council had not taken account of a legal agreement which affected the site. There was also some unreasonable delay by the Council in responding to matters. The complaint was settled by the Council agreeing to pay the complainant £100 compensation for his time and trouble in bringing the issues to its attention. (This matter is ongoing, in that I have a new complaint about subsequent related matters on behalf of a large number of residents.)

Another planning complaint about delay in enforcing a planning condition, relating to the provision of landscaping, was resolved by the Council initiating negotiations with the site developer to provide additional screening between the site and the complainant's property.

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The final local settlement related to a complaint concerning a housing benefit claim. In this case the Council settled the complaint by promptly acknowledging its mistake regarding an alleged overpayment of benefit, and by offering the claimant options for resolving the matter. These included the possibility of having the money repaid to him.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

Last year I referred four complaints back to the Council as it had not had a reasonable opportunity to deal with them before I became involved. I note that in one case the complainant remained dissatisfied and re-submitted the complaint to me after the Council had considered matters. But I found at that stage that the complaint fell outside my jurisdiction .

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

I ask for responses to my initial requests for information to be provided within 28 calendar days. I note the Council only met this target in a third of cases, and in one instance information about a planning complaint took 88 days. Its average response time was 41.8 days. It would help us in providing a prompt service to complainants if the Council could endeavour to meet our target response time more consistently. Please let me know if there is any other advice or assistance we can offer in this respect.

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, 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'. Again, 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.

Tony Redmond
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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	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	0	1	2	11	3	2	19
2006 / 2007	1	1	0	79	1	1	83
2005 / 2006	1	1	2	11	1	1	17

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	3	0	0	11	2	2	4	18	22
2006 / 2007	0	2	0	0	5	39	3	28	49	77
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	7	4	6	3	17	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	6	41.8
2006 / 2007	42	32.6
2005 / 2006	4	33.8

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