

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Gedling Borough 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 Gedling Borough 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.

Complaints received

I received 23 complaints about the Council in the year ending 31 March 2008. This was a drop of ten on the previous year and, as the attached information shows, was across a range of service areas. The numbers received are too low to enable any meaningful conclusions to be drawn from them.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

The average response time has risen slightly from 21.7 days in 2006/07 to 29.6 in 2007/08. These times give me no cause for concern; if I examine the underlying detail it shows that the figures were skewed by one complaint which took 62 days. But for this complaint the average response time would have been 26.4 days - well within the requested 28 days. I thank the Council for its continued cooperation in this as it helps my staff reduce the time it takes to respond to complaints, ensuring a better service for our complainants.

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 did not issue any reports about your Council. I determined four by local settlement. This rate is in line with the national average.

Other findings

In total, I made 22 decisions on complaints about your Council. This number differs slightly from the number of complaints received as it includes complaints received in the previous year. Eight of these were premature, one outside my jurisdiction and of the 13 substantive decisions, the majority (9) resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

My investigations have not highlighted widespread problems with your Council's own complaints handling. I look at only a small number of complaints about your Council and so cannot draw any meaningful conclusions. However, of the four local settlements, two were in relation to local taxation and in both instances my investigators were moved to comment on the poor communication and/or record keeping by your Council in relation to Council Tax and Council Tax Benefit accounts. I hope the Council will consider this observation in the context of its own complaint handling data.

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)