

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Dartford 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 we have received about Dartford Borough 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 2007/08 I received twelve complaints against your authority, two more than last year. Planning again generated the largest number of complaints but of the seven received five related to the same development.

Decisions on complaints

During the year we made decisions on 12 complaints against your authority. We found no maladministration in nine complaints and we exercised discretion to close one without requiring any action by the Council.

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).

None of the complaints we investigated this year justified the issue of a report. I settled just one complaint, about the Council's actions in relation to the recovery of a housing benefit overpayment. Your authority apologised for the difficulties that had arisen and wrote off the outstanding overpayment. It reminded officers that recovery should be suspended pending an appeal.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

We referred one complaint back to your Council for consideration as we did not think you had had sufficient opportunity to deal with it through your own procedures. The small number of complaints referred to me and the fact that I have upheld only one is evidence that your authority handles complaints effectively.

Llaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

This year my investigators made enquiries regarding two complaints. Officers have taken an average of 24.5 days to respond. This is within my 28 calendar day target, and is consistent with the times taken in the previous year. The responses are detailed and helpful. Officers responded promptly to my suggested settlement of the benefits complaint.

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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.

This year we provided further training to your Council in Effective Complaints Handling and the response has been positive.

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)