

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

We received 40 complaints about your Council during 2007/08, a reduction of 8 compared to 2006/07. The numbers and distribution of complaints across categories were very similar to previous years. There were small reductions in the number of complaints about children and family services, education, other, planning and building control and transport and highways. We also saw a small increase in public finance complaints, although they remain at a very low level with 2 complaints received.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

It took an average of 29.9 days to respond to first enquiries during the year, slightly over the target of 28 days and slower than the 22.3 days achieved in the previous year. The complaints which took longest to receive a response were about adult social care (44.5 days), although this is due to the response on one complaint taking 61 days, and children and family services (41.5 days). Responses continue to be of a good quality and my investigators have commented favourably on the helpfulness of officers. Speed, along with quality of response, is crucial in helping the Ombudsman to provide a good service to complainants.

Liaison arrangements with your Council work well and my staff have not experienced any problems over the year.

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.

We did not publish any reports about the Council during the year. There were 7 local settlements leading to payments of £5,600. One complaint highlighted problems with home care visits being missed or late and led to a payment of £2,500, as well as a number of measures to prevent a recurrence. Another complaint involved a failure to provide education to an autistic child for 6 months, which resulted in a payment of £1,500. The Council has subsequently improved its interventions for autistic pupils.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

We decided 42 complaints during 2007/08, of which 7 (17%) were premature, that is the Council had not had a reasonable opportunity to respond to them. Eight of the complaints we decided (19%) were resubmitted premature complaints where the complainant was unhappy with the Council's response. This compares to a national figure of 10%. Of these, one resulted in a local settlement. These figures suggest that the Council's complaints procedure is working well and my investigations did not reveal any issues or concerns.

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.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand. In addition to 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 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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Enc: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)