

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

We received 23 complaints against your Council, double the number in the previous year, but more in line with numbers received the year before that. Nine of these concerned planning and building control, five were about council tax, and three about housing benefit. Others concerned anti-social behaviour, environmental health and housing.

## **Decisions on complaints**

I made 15 decisions on complaints against your Council, excluding those which were referred back to the Council to put through your own complaints procedure.

### ***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.

None of the complaints we investigated this year justified the issue of a report. I agreed local settlements on two complaints.

In one case the Council delayed for eight months before deciding not to review a decision to refuse housing benefit when the complainant, who was elderly and in poor health, had challenged the decision. The Ombudsman normally expects councils to pass on appeals to the independent Appeals Service in one month. The complainant won his appeal. The Council agreed to pay £500 compensation for the delay, distress and time and trouble. I invited the Council to consider reviewing procedures in the Benefit Service and I would be pleased to know if the suggestion was taken up.

In the other case the Council paid compensation of £75 for delay in responding to the complainant's pre-application planning enquiry and reports of breaches of planning control, and agreed to investigate the alleged breaches.

## **Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints**

My office referred six complaints back to the Council to be dealt with under its complaints procedure. We also decided two complaints which had previously been referred back to the Council in this way but where the complainant had sent them back, dissatisfied with the Council's reply. In neither case did we find maladministration.

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

In 2007/08 we made written enquiries on eight complaints. The average time for the Council's response, at around 20 days, continues the downward trend identified the previous year and is within the target timescale which I ask councils to comply with.

## **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 am pleased that some of your officers were able to attend an Effective Complaint Handling course hosted by Horsham District Council and I hope they found it useful.

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**  
**Local Government Ombudsman**  
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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	3	1	5	9	5	0	23
2006 / 2007	0	1	4	5	0	1	11
2005 / 2006	1	0	6	13	3	2	25

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	8	3	2	6	15	21
2006 / 2007	0	0	0	0	13	5	1	2	19	21
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	7	4	2	4	16	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	8	20.1
2006 / 2007	5	24.6
2005 / 2006	15	33.5

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