

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

Gravesham 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 2007/2008 - Introduction

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about Gravesham 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

I received 22 complaints against your Council in the year, six more than in the previous year. There was a continuing slight increase in the number of complaints about housing; complaints about planning and building control decreased. Given the low number of complaints overall, I do not consider these figures indicate any particular problems in service delivery.

Decisions on complaints

We made decisions on 22 complaints this year. We found no maladministration in eight complaints and we exercised discretion to close a further three without requiring any action by the Council. I found that three were outside my jurisdiction. We referred seven complaints to your authority as 'premature' as we did not think you had had sufficient opportunity to deal with them through your own procedures.

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.

We agreed just one local settlement. The complaint concerned the way the Council dealt with the provision of temporary accommodation to someone who had been made homeless. As a result of the Council's actions the complainant was caused additional inconvenience and incurred additional costs. The Council readily admitted it had not dealt with matters as well as it should have done, and agreed promptly to my investigator's proposal that it should pay compensation totalling £890.

Other findings

There is one further complaint which I consider worth drawing attention to. It concerned a parking matter. I found no fault by the Council in relation to the substantive complaint. However, my investigator noted that the Council had wrongly told the complainant he had a right of appeal to the Parking Adjudicator when this was not the case, at that time. Officers agreed to amend the letters they sent in future to reflect this point. I am grateful for this positive and helpful response.

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Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

On the few occasions my investigators have needed to make enquiries of the Council, officers have taken an average of 28.8 days to respond. This is only just outside my 28 calendar day target and is an increase of four days on previous years. This increase was due to difficulties that arose in responding to two particular enquiries. I am satisfied that there were specific reasons for these difficulties. Officers' responses in all cases have continued to be detailed and helpful.

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.

Two of my investigators held a training course for officers at your Council's offices in June 2007. However, 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.

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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	2	8	5	2	3	2	22
2006 / 2007	1	5	1	6	1	2	16
2005 / 2006	1	2	6	6	1	0	16

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	1	0	0	8	3	3	7	15	22
2006 / 2007	0	4	0	0	3	3	1	6	11	17
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	4	1	3	3	11	14

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	28.8
2006 / 2007	8	24.4
2005 / 2006	3	24.0

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