

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
Bassetlaw 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 received about Bassetlaw District 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**

### ***Volume***

I received 29 complaints about your Council in 2007/08; little change to the previous year when it was 30. There were no dramatic rises or falls in the volumes of any particular type of complaint.

### ***Character***

Of the complaints received, the two largest groups (like last year) were housing and planning which collectively accounted for over 60% of the total. Given the relatively low number of complaints, I have not drawn any conclusions from this. However, I would ask your Council to consider why this might be, and whether in the context of data from your own (and A1 Housing's) complaints procedures, there are issues that need to be addressed.

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

My office continues to enjoy a good relationship with your Council's liaison officer who provides timely responses to our initial enquiries. As the statistical information shows, the average response time has fallen from 26.4 days in 2006/07 to 24 in 2007/08. These times are within the requested 28 days. I thank your 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 in 2007/08.

Of the 14 decisions that were neither premature nor outside jurisdiction, six were local settlements – just under 43%. This figure is higher than the national average but should be treated with caution as the numbers are too low to enable definitive conclusions to be drawn. What is significant about the number of local settlements is that of the six, four related to housing repairs and at least two of these made direct reference to communication with A1 Housing. I raise this matter not as a major concern but to highlight to your Council the importance of a well-defined and effective working relationship between yourselves and A1 Housing.

I know from contacts my officers have had with your complaints staff, that your Council and A1 Housing have paid particular attention to complaints handling over the year. I am aware of the positive steps both the Council and A1 Housing are taking to further improve complaint handling and specifically how lessons are learned from complaints. This is very encouraging and points to an

excellent approach to complaint handling and service improvements. I would hope that the fruits of this effort are evident in the statistics at the end of the current year.

### ***Other findings***

In total, I made 31 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. As you can see from the statistical information, 15 of these were premature, two outside jurisdiction and of the 14 substantive decisions, five resulted in a finding of no maladministration. The main change from the previous year was the change in the ratio between local settlements and findings of no maladministration. In 2006/07 it was 3:15, while last year it was 6:5. This change is not necessarily a negative indicator as it can signify many things. It might, for example, reflect that the Council's own complaint procedures are dealing with more minor complaints, while the more complex or serious are progressing to me. I would encourage your Council to examine the change in the context of data from your own complaints procedures.

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

I am aware of the focus your Council has given to complaint handling. While complaint numbers to me are too low to enable clear conclusions to be drawn, I would make one observation for your Council to consider in the context of your own data.

Almost half of the decisions I took concluded the complaints to us were premature; the question this raises in my mind is why such a high proportion? There are many reasons why people might complain directly to me, many of which are outside your control. However, your Council might want to consider this and whether its own (and A1 Housing's) complaints procedure is capturing and dealing with complaints at the appropriate time.

### **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  
Local Government Ombudsman  
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17 Shipton Road  
YORK  
YO30 5FZ**

**June 2008**

Enc: Statistical data  
Note on interpretation of statistics  
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

<b>Complaints received by subject area</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Transport and highways</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	1	9	8	9	1	1	<b>29</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	0	11	4	9	4	2	<b>30</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	6	3	25	0	0	<b>34</b>

**Note:** these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

<b>Decisions</b>	<b>MI reps</b>	<b>LS</b>	<b>M reps</b>	<b>NM reps</b>	<b>No mal</b>	<b>Omb disc</b>	<b>Outside jurisdiction</b>	<b>Premature complaints</b>	<b>Total excl premature</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	0	6	0	0	5	3	2	15	16	<b>31</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	0	3	0	0	15	4	2	10	24	<b>34</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	3	0	0	13	8	4	6	28	<b>34</b>

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

<b>Response times</b>	<b>FIRST ENQUIRIES</b>	
	<b>No. of First Enquiries</b>	<b>Avg no. of days to respond</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	9	24.0
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	14	26.4
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	12	31.7

**Average local authority response times 01/04/2007 to 31/03/2008**

<b>Types of authority</b>	<b>&lt;= 28 days %</b>	<b>29 - 35 days %</b>	<b>&gt; = 36 days %</b>
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