

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

**Bracknell Forest
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 Bracknell Forest Borough Council during 2007/08. We have included comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements so they can assist you with service improvements.

I hope this letter will be a useful addition to other information you hold on how people experience or perceive your services.

There are two attachments which form an integral part of this letter: statistical data covering a three year period and a note to explain the statistics.

Complaints received

We received 17 complaints during the year, marginally up on last year when we received 16. The complaints were spread over all the complaint categories including four about children and family services and four about housing (including three about repairs).

Decisions on complaints

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.

None of the complaints we investigated this year justified the issue of a report. I decided two complaints as local settlements. The Council agreed to pay compensation of £200 for a planning complaint in which the planning committee had imposed a condition but this was not included in the notice granting planning permission. The Council had quickly admitted fault, apologised and reviewed its procedures to try to stop similar problems occurring again. But I felt that modest compensation was also appropriate and to its credit the Council agreed to pay it.

The other local settlement involved a housing complaint when the Council obtained a warrant of eviction even though the tenant had made an arrangement to pay the arrears and was keeping to the arrangement. The Council admitted it should not have tried to evict the tenant at this time and it refunded the court costs.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

During the year we referred five complaints back to the Council for consideration under its own complaints procedure. We decided one complaint which had previously been sent back to the Council in this way but where the complainant came back to us, dissatisfied with the Council's reply. I did not uphold the complaint.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

When we make written enquiries to the Council we ask for a reply within 28 days. Last year the average time taken by the Council to reply was over 32 days so I am pleased that this year the response time has improved to under 27 days.

I am also pleased that one of your officers was able to attend the Link Officer seminar which we held in November. In February an Assistant Ombudsman visited the Council when he noted, among other things, that the Council's housing stock transferred to Bracknell Forest Homes in February.

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 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
10th floor, Millbank Tower
Millbank
LONDON SW1P 4QP

June 2008

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

Complaints received by subject area	Adult care services	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	1	1	4	2	4	1	2	2	17
2006 / 2007	1	1	0	4	2	2	4	2	16
2005 / 2006	1	1	3	3	4	3	16	0	31

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	7	4	2	5	15	20
2006 / 2007	0	4	0	0	7	9	2	1	22	23
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	8	1	4	8	14	22

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	7	24.6
2006 / 2007	14	32.9
2005 / 2006	11	27.5

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