

Local Government  
**OMBUDSMAN**

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

**Derbyshire Dales 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 Derbyshire Dales 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**

We received 11 complaints about your Council during 2007/08, a reduction of 5 over the previous year. These fell into 2 categories: other complaints, which increased slightly, and planning and building control complaints, which reduced in number. There were no complaints about housing or public finance.

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

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

Average response time to first enquiries during the year was 31.1 days, above the 28 day target. This is disappointing as the comparable figure last year was 25.3 days. Breaking down response times by category shows that planning and building control complaints took longest to respond to, with an average time of 34 days, and one complaint taking 49 days. Speed of response is important in providing a quality service to complainants and I hope the Council will be able to respond more quickly during this 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 issue any reports about the Council during 2007/08 and there were no local settlements.

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

We decided 13 complaints about the Council during 2007/08, of which 2 (15%) were premature, that is the Council had not had a reasonable opportunity to respond to them. Looking at the number of resubmitted premature complaints and the decisions made on them gives an indication of how the Council's complaints procedure is operating. Two of the complaints decided were resubmitted premature complaints and neither resulted in a local settlement. No problems were highlighted during investigations. This evidence suggests that the Council's complaints procedure is working well.

## **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 am pleased that your Council, in conjunction with a neighbouring one, has taken advantage of both the Good Complaints Handling and Effective Complaints Handling 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**  
**Beverley House**  
**17 Shipton Road**  
**YORK**  
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**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>Adult care services</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	0	0	5	6	0	<b>11</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	0	3	3	10	0	<b>16</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	1	1	6	9	4	<b>21</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	0	0	0	8	1	2	2	11	<b>13</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	0	3	0	0	9	2	2	3	16	<b>19</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	0	0	0	5	2	1	5	8	<b>13</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>	7	31.1
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	8	25.3
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	9	24.1

**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