

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

During the year I received 26 complaints, a figure consistent with the number I received in the previous year when I received 25. No trends or patterns emerged during the year to give rise to any serious concern although the Council may wish to reflect on possible reasons for the rise in housing complaints from 6 last year to 13 this year. This rise is too small in terms of numbers to worry me unduly but if a trend is emerging the Council would be well advised to address it now.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

I ask all authorities to respond to my initial enquiries within 28 calendar days. I made detailed enquiries of the Council on 12 occasions during the year and I am pleased to record the fact that the Council, on average, took just 20.8 days to reply to me. I congratulate the Council on this level of performance.

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 issued no reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

I determined 31 complaints against the Council during the year a figure which differs from the number of complaints sent to me because of work in hand at the beginning of the year. Thirteen of these complaints were premature and I sent each of these to the Council so that it might take the opportunity to address them. One complaint was outside of my jurisdiction and in 4 cases I exercised the general discretion available to me not to pursue the matter. I found no evidence of maladministration by the Council in 9 cases and in the remaining 4 cases the Council agreed to settle the matter acknowledging that something had gone wrong and acknowledging that it would be appropriate to offer some form of remedy.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

No issues arose during the year to suggest that there are any problems with the way in which the Council handles complaints made directly to it by members of the public.

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
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June 2008

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