

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

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

We received 27 complaints about the Council, a marginal increase on last year. Over half of the complaints were about housing and they covered a range of services including housing repairs, allocations, tenancy management, sales and leaseholds and private sector housing.

We received a handful of complaints about planning issues, two about waste management and single complaints about a few other service areas.

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. Three complaints were decided as local settlements, two of them about housing repairs. The first was about a failure to properly inform a tenant about options when her central heating was being replaced. To remedy the complaint the Council agreed to re-plaster where a fire had been removed and to pay a redecorations allowance. In the second case, the complainant alleged that, at the end of his mother's tenancy, the Council unreasonably asked for the costs it incurred in bringing the bathroom up to a standard fit for letting. The complainant had reinstated a bath as was required by the tenancy agreement. The Council agreed to waive the costs.

The other local settlement was achieved when the Council agreed to pay compensation to reflect its delay in dealing with a complaint and request for compensation in relation to damage caused by overgrown trees.

Other decisions

In a planning complaint, we drew the Council's attention to a possible ambiguity in its supplementary planning guidance about space between buildings. I am grateful that the Council did review the matter and, although it did not share our view about possible ambiguity, it agreed that it would be appropriate in any future review of the guidelines to differentiate between situations where houses would be directly opposite each other and where the relationship would be more oblique.

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Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

Of the 26 complaints decided by my office, nine were referred back to the Council to be dealt with under its complaints procedure. We decided two complaints which had previously been sent back to the Council in this way but where the complainants came back to us, dissatisfied with the Council's reply. In neither case did we find fault.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

During the year we made formal written enquiries on 11 complaints. The Council's average response time of just less than 23 days is well within the target timescales which we set. I appreciate the Council's continuing good performance here.

In November we held a seminar for Council link officers and it was good to have an officer from the Council attending. I hope she found the day useful.

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 can run open courses for groups of staff from different smaller authorities and also customise courses to meet your Council's specific requirements. Indeed, I was pleased that the Council was represented at a course on Effective Complaints Handling which we ran in December for authorities in West Sussex.

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.

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