

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Exmoor National Parks Authority
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 Exmoor National Parks Authority. 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

Volume and Character

Two complaints were received against your Authority this year and both were about planning and building control.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

When we need to complete an investigation we issue a report. I issued no reports against your Authority this year.

A 'local settlement' is a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, the Authority has agreed to take some action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint. The investigation is then discontinued.

In 2007/08 the Local Government Ombudsmen determined some 27% of complaints by way of local settlement (excluding 'premature' complaints - where councils have not had a proper chance to deal with them - and those outside our jurisdiction).

No complaints were subject to local settlement this year. I have had no cause to uphold a complaint against your Authority in the past three years and I congratulate you on your exemplary performance in this area.

Other findings

Three complaints were decided during the year. One was outside my jurisdiction because the complainant had already exercised his right of appeal to a government minister and the other two were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen.

Your Authority's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I am pleased to note that your Authority's complaints procedure is now signposted on its Home Page and that it is clearly set out and readily accessible.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

This year I made two enquiries of the Authority and the average response time was 28 days which meets my target. However, one response was received within eight days and the other took 48 days, and I hope your Authority will make efforts to ensure that all responses are received with 28 days in the coming year.

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.

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, have 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'. I would appreciate your feedback on how useful you have found these reports, particularly on any complaints protocols put in place as part of the overall governance arrangements for partnerships involving your Council.

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.

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