



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Bedford Borough Council
for the year ended
31 March 2007**

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) investigates complaints by members of the public who consider that they have been caused injustice through administrative fault by local authorities and certain other bodies. 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 2006/07 - Introduction

The aim of the annual letter is to provide a summary of information on the complaints about your authority that we have received and try to draw any lessons learned about the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements. These might then be fed back into 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.

There are two attachments which 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

We received 15 complaints during the year, a slight increase compared to the 11 last year, but we expect some variations over time. I see no significance in the rise.

Character

Complaints about planning matters (8) doubled compared to the previous year. The planning complaints were mostly about planning applications and two related complaints concerned a listed building. Two complaints each were received in the benefits, transport and other categories.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

We use the term 'local settlement' to describe the outcome of a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, the Council takes, or agrees to take, some action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint and the investigation does not need to be completed. These form a significant proportion of the complaints we determine. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

I issued no reports against the Council during the year. No complaints were settled locally, and as a result of this the Council was not asked to pay compensation to complainants.

Other findings

Twenty complaints were decided during the year. Of these, five were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons and four complaints were premature. The remaining 11 were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The number of premature complaints compared to the number of decisions amounts to 20%. Nationally 28% of the decisions we make are that complaints are premature. A low number of premature complaints is usually a good sign and can indicate that residents know how to complain to the Council if they wish to do so.

The Council's complaint procedure is available on your website, but I note that your search facility does not in fact bring up a link to the procedure using the word "complaint". You may wish to consider

amending this, as otherwise a complainant would need to know to look under the Corporate Complaint Procedure heading. Complaints can be made to the Council using an online form. But complainants are not provided with a direct link to our website. It would be helpful for complainants to have information about the sort of complaints we can investigate, and if you wish we can provide a hyperlink to our website. Please let me know if you would like us to send this.

On 3 October 2006 my Assistant Ombudsman, Reynold Stephen gave a presentation discussing last year's annual letter. If you would like a further presentation this year please let Mr Stephen know.

Training in complaint handling

As part of our role to provide advice in good administrative practice, we offer training courses for all levels of local authority staff in complaints handling and investigation. The feedback from courses that have been delivered over the past two and a half years is very positive.

We delivered the effective complaints handling course at the Council on 15 January 2007. I hope this was useful. I have enclosed some information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings. If we can provide any further training for you please let Reynold Stephen, Assistant Ombudsman, know.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on three complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 23 days, an improvement on the 26.7 days it took last year. I would like to thank the Council for responding so promptly, easily satisfying our target of 28 days.

No one from the Council has attended the annual link officer seminar recently and you may wish to consider sending someone to the seminar to be held later in November. If so, please let Reynold Stephen know and he will arrange for an invitation to be sent. In addition, if it would help for Mr Stephen to visit the Council and give a presentation about how we investigate complaints I would be happy to arrange this.

LGO developments

I thought it would be helpful to update you on a project we are implementing to improve the first contact that people have with us as part of our customer focus initiative. We are developing a new Access and Advice Service that will provide a gateway to our services for all complainants and enquirers. It will be mainly telephone-based but will also deal with email, text and letter correspondence. As the project progresses we will keep you informed about developments and expected timescales.

Changes brought about by the Local Government Bill are also expected to impact on the way that we work and again we will keep you informed as relevant.

We have just issued a special report that draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for phone masts considered under the prior approval system, which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the problems that can occur.

A further special report will be published in July focusing on the difficulties that can be encountered when complaints are received by local authorities about services delivered through a partnership. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* sets out our advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by adopting good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

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
Local Government Ombudsman

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June 2007

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

Complaints received by subject area	Benefits	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	2	8	1	2	15
2005 / 2006	2	3	4	2	0	11
2004 / 2005	0	5	8	1	5	19

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 iurisdiction	Premature complaints	Total excl premature	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	0	0	0	5	6	5	4	16	20
2005 / 2006	1	2	0	0	3	1	1	0	8	8
2004 / 2005	0	4	0	0	5	4	4	3	17	20

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
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	3	23.0
2005 / 2006	6	26.7
2004 / 2005	7	28.3

Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District Councils	48.9	23.4	27.7
Unitary Authorities	30.4	37.0	32.6
Metropolitan Authorities	38.9	41.7	19.4
County Councils	47.1	32.3	20.6
London Boroughs	39.4	33.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	66.7	33.3	0.0