



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Bedfordshire County 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 Bedfordshire County Council 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 16 complaints against your Council in the 12 months ending 31 March 2007. This was 12 fewer than last year and represents a decrease of 28%. Two years ago we received 49 complaints against your Council, so the current level of complaints represents a significant decline. This is commendable and no doubt reflects the steps that I know you have been taking to improve your own complaints handling processes.

Character

The complaints covered most Council services, although there were none about planning matters. Most complaints – seven – were about Social Services, four fewer than last year and 15 fewer than the previous year. We received three complaints about Education matters, which also represents a significant decrease compared with last year (when we received eight) and the previous year (when we received 13). We received five complaints about Transport and Highways matters, a slight fall compared with last year.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and 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.

We did not issue any reports against your Council in the period and settled two complaints. In the first complaint about a Highways matter your Council failed to advise the complainant that his complaint was substantially a matter for the Borough Council. This caused him unnecessary time and trouble in pursuing the complaint. The Council agreed to compensate the complainant, but he said that he did not want to gain financially from the complaint. In the second complaint your Council failed to deal with the complainant's needs as a disabled person and she felt disenfranchised over the provision it made. Your Council agreed to respond to the complainant's requests for information and to streamline the different care plans that applied to her.

I am grateful to the Council for its assistance in settling these complaints.

Other findings

We determined a total of eleven complaints against your Council during the period. Apart from the two complaints that were settled locally, we did not uphold three complaints on the grounds that there

was insufficient evidence of maladministration, did not pursue three complaints because they were outside our jurisdiction and discontinued the investigation into one complaint under our general discretion. We also treated two complaints as premature.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The two premature complaints we received in the period reflect a clear trend of decreasing complaints of this nature over the last three years. It suggests that residents and service users are very aware of your complaints processes and do not complain to me before first complaining to you. I commend your Council for its performance in this area.

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.

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 now offer these courses specifically for social services staff. We have also successfully piloted a course on reviewing complaints for social services review panel members. We can run open courses for groups of staff from 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.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on 10 complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 36.4 days, an increase on the 24 days it took last year. Most of the responses that exceeded the 28 day target were about Social Services matters, so you may wish to consider how response times in this service area could be improved. I hope the Council will improve its previously excellent response times here, particularly given the relatively low number of enquiries I made of the Council.

My staff have a good working relationship with your officers and my Assistant Ombudsman visited your offices on 13 October 2006 to present last year's annual letter to your Standards Committee. I hope that officers and Members found this helpful.

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
Details of training courses

Complaints received by subject area	Adult care services	Children and family services	Education	Other	Social Services - other	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	5	3	1	0	5	16
2005 / 2006	5	6	8	3	0	6	28
2004 / 2005	2	22	13	4	1	7	49

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 jurisdiction	Premature complaints	Total excl premature	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	2	0	0	3	1	3	2	9	11
2005 / 2006	0	4	0	0	9	1	11	5	25	30
2004 / 2005	1	13	0	0	7	14	5	10	40	50

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	10	36.4
2005 / 2006	13	24.5
2004 / 2005	22	24.0

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