



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
South Shropshire District
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

In the year to 31 March 2007 my office received 20 complaints against your Council. While this is an increase of five over the last year, the number remains small given the number of decisions the Council makes on behalf of its citizens each year, and we expect to see these fluctuations over time.

Character

Sixteen of the 20 complaints I received concerned planning and building control matters. The predominance of planning issues is typical of complaints against district councils, especially those serving rural areas. The number of complaints about other service areas is too small to allow for any significant conclusions to be drawn.

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 am pleased that, once again, I had no cause to issue a report against the Council. There was just one local settlement. Here, the Council delayed responding for five months to a complaint made about the conduct of a meeting of the Development Control Committee. In settlement, the Council agreed to pay the complainant £100 compensation. Given that nationally over a quarter of complaints were upheld last year, either wholly or in part, the Council is to be congratulated on the fact that only one complaint merited settlement.

Other findings

We made 16 decisions on complaints in 2006/07. In addition to the local settlement mentioned above, two complaints were outside my jurisdiction. In four we found no evidence of maladministration and I used my discretion to discontinue the investigation of eight further complaints, mainly because no significant injustice flowed from the fault alleged. The remaining complaint was referred back to you to be considered through the Council's own complaints procedure.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The fact that only one of the complaints we received in 2006/07 was referred back indicates that the Council's complaints procedure continues to work effectively. I am pleased to note that your website provides details of your complaints procedure and an online complaint form.

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 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 initial enquiries on six complaints in 2006/07, the same number as in the previous two years and, on average, the Council responded in just 21.8 days. This is a great improvement on the average of 49.7 days in the last year. I am most grateful for the work your officers have done to achieve this excellent result.

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
The Oaks No 2
Westwood Way
Westwood Business Park
Coventry CV4 8JB

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	1	1	16	1	1	20
2005 / 2006	0	0	14	1	0	15
2004 / 2005	1	2	4	0	0	7

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	1	0	0	4	8	2	1	15	16
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	9	2	0	4	12	16
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	3	2	2	0	8	8

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	6	21.8
2005 / 2006	6	49.7
2004 / 2005	6	44.3

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