



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
West Oxfordshire 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 2006-7 we received twelve complaints against your Council. This is a broadly similar number to incoming complaints in the two previous years.

Character

Six complaints were about planning, two about housing and two about public finance. This, again, is broadly similar to the picture in previous years.

Decisions on complaints

In 2006-7 we decided 15 complaints. Two were outside my jurisdiction and we referred a further three back to the Council to deal with because they were premature. Of the remaining ten complaints I found no or insufficient evidence of maladministration in eight and in a further two cases I exercised my discretion to discontinue my investigation.

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.

Other findings

I did not issue any reports against your Council in 2006-7. In one complaint about planning I found fault by the Council in the way it considered a planning application and failed to keep the complainant informed. But the Council had already acknowledged and apologised for these failings and, in my view, it was clear that no significant injustice had arisen. So I did not recommend that the Council should provide a further remedy for this complaint.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

There were three premature complaints in 2006-7, compared to none the previous year. Although this figure has increased, it is still below the national average for councils as a whole and suggests that the Council publicises and operates its complaints procedure effectively.

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

2006-7 saw a significant deterioration in the Council's average response time to our enquiries. Following improvement in the three previous years the Council's response time worsened from 33 days to 51.4. This does not compare well with the times achieved by other District Councils or with our target time of 28 days. The Council must now take steps to identify the cause of the problem and ensure that it replies more promptly so that my staff can provide complainants with a timely decision on their complaints.

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	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	2	1	6	2	0	12
2005 / 2006	0	1	1	6	1	0	9
2004 / 2005	1	2	0	9	0	2	14

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	0	0	0	8	2	2	3	12	15
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	5	1	1	0	7	7
2004 / 2005	0	3	0	0	8	3	0	3	14	17

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	5	51.4
2005 / 2006	8	33.0
2004 / 2005	7	37.3

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