

Local Government OMBUDSMAN

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter**

Gloucestershire County Council
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 Gloucestershire County Council. 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

We received 30 complaints against your Council during the year which is in line with numbers received in the previous two years.

Character

The category which accounted for the largest number of complaints was education with 11. This was an increase on the previous year when there had only been three but a return to the level of 2005/6. There were nine complaints about transport and highways which was at a similar level to 2006/7. There were no complaints about planning and building control, five about adult care services and two about children and family services.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

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

A 'local settlement' is a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, the Council 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 local settlement (excluding 'premature' complaints - where councils have not had a proper chance to deal with them - and those outside our jurisdiction). There were no complaints that were locally settled. I congratulate the Council on its performance here.

Other findings

There were 27 decisions in total. In eight cases the matters complained of were outside my jurisdiction. Thirteen complaints were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them, mainly because no significant injustice flowed from the fault alleged.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

Six complaints were treated as premature and referred back to your Council so that they could first be considered through your complaints procedure. This is in line with previous years and at 21% of the total is well below the national average of 27%.

Only one complaint was resubmitted and that was outside my jurisdiction. I have no concerns about the way the Council's complaints procedure is operating.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Enquiries were made on 11 complaints during the year. Your Council's average response time of 32.4 days, is a slight improvement on last year's average but remains below our target timescale of 28 days. The quality of responses is generally very high but I would ask the Council to take action to improve the time taken.

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 now offer these courses specifically for social services staff and a course on reviewing complaints for social care review panel members. 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

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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 these, particularly on any complaints protocols put in place as part of the overall governance arrangements for partnerships your Council has set up.

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 2008

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

Complaints received by subject area	Adult care services	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Social Services - other	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	5	2	11	0	3	0	0	9	30
2006 / 2007	4	7	3	1	3	4	0	8	30
2005 / 2006	3	3	14	0	3	6	1	5	35

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	0	0	0	0	7	6	8	6	21	27
2006 / 2007	0	3	0	0	14	3	5	8	25	33
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	15	2	8	5	28	33

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	11	32.4
2006 / 2007	14	37.9
2005 / 2006	17	32.1

Average local authority response times 01/04/2007 to 31/03/2008

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District Councils	56.4	24.6	19.1
Unitary Authorities	41.3	50.0	8.7
Metropolitan Authorities	58.3	30.6	11.1
County Councils	47.1	38.2	14.7
London Boroughs	45.5	27.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	71.4	28.6	0.0