

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Redditch Borough 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 Redditch Borough 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 13 complaints against your council during the year, three fewer than last year. We expect to see fluctuations like this from year to year.

Character

Three of the complaints were about benefits and three involved housing matters. The number of complaints about planning fell from five in the previous two years to one. Four complaints were in the category of "Other", two of which were about anti-social behaviour, one about contracts and business matters and one about leisure and culture.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

When we complete an investigation we issue a report. I issued no reports against your Council in 2007-08

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).

Three complaints were subject to local settlements during the year and a total of £1,500 was paid in compensation.

One complaint related to a delay in taking action over a breach of planning control which had caused stress and disturbance to a neighbour. The Council agreed to pay compensation of £1,000 and it undertook to deal with any further breaches of planning control at the site in a more timely way.

A second complaint was about a housing transfer. The Council had failed to carry out a full inspection before the tenancy agreement was signed and it failed to carry out a number of repairs before the tenants moved in. The Council agreed to carry out the repairs as determined on a site visit and to discuss possible options for a new transfer as the complainant had since been registered as disabled. It also paid £500 as compensation for the distress caused by its errors.

The third settlement related to a complaint involving anti-social behaviour. The complainant was offered a housing transfer on the grounds that it would benefit both families involved in a neighbour dispute. This was commendable as I had not identified any maladministration but the Council still used its discretion to find a sensible solution to a difficult problem.

Other findings

Four complaints were treated as premature and referred back to your council to be considered through the complaints procedure.

In three other cases I decided that the matters complained about were outside my jurisdiction and the remaining three complaints were discontinued because no evidence of maladministration was evident.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The proportion of premature complaints was 30%. This was slightly higher than the national average but it was an improvement on the previous year. One of the four premature complaints, concerning benefits, was resubmitted to me and this is still under investigation.

I am pleased to note that the Council's website has a clear explanation of its complaints process including a direct link to our website.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Last year I expressed my disappointment at the average time it had taken the Council to respond to our enquiries. I am therefore very pleased to note that the average number of days taken has been reduced from 39.6 to 26.7. This is a significant improvement and I am very grateful for the Council's efforts. The time target is 28 days and your council met this with most of its responses.

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

We launched the LGO Advice Team in April, providing a first contact service for all enquirers and new complainants. Demand for the service has been high. Our team of advisers, trained to provide comprehensive information and advice, has dealt with many thousands of calls since the service started.

The team handles complaints submitted by telephone, email or text, as well as in writing. This new power to accept complaints other than in writing was one of the provisions of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, which also came into force in April. Our experience of implementing other provisions in the Act, such as complaints about service failure and apparent maladministration, is being kept under review and will be subject to further discussion. Any feedback from your Council would be welcome.

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
The Oaks No2
Westwood Way
Westwood Business Park
Coventry CV4 8JB

June 2008

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	3	3	4	1	1	1	13
2006 / 2007	2	6	3	5	0	0	16
2005 / 2006	0	5	2	5	0	1	13

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	3	0	0	3	0	3	4	9	13
2006 / 2007	0	2	0	0	4	0	3	6	9	15
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	5	3	1	4	10	14

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	6	26.7
2006 / 2007	8	39.6
2005 / 2006	2	22.5

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