

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Slough 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 Slough Borough Council. We have included comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements so they can assist you with service improvements.

I hope this letter will be a useful addition to other information you hold 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 explain the statistics.

Complaints received

We received 39 complaints this year which is broadly in line with last year when we received 37. There were eight complaints about planning; a mix of cases about the council's handling of planning applications and its enforcement activities. While planning complaints increased, there was a drop in complaints about housing. Most of the eight housing complaints were about disrepair.

Complaints about benefits increased to six (from one last year) and there were five complaints about local taxation. The 'other' category includes three complaints about anti-social behaviour.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

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 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).

None of the complaints we investigated this year justified the issue of a report. I decided seven complaints as local settlements, which at almost 37% of decisions (excluding premature complaints and those outside our jurisdiction) is above the average for all authorities. The settlements covered a range of service areas and involved a range of actions, procedural changes and compensation payments totalling almost £4,500.

In a complaint about anti-social behaviour, there were delays in taking effective action and the Council agreed to take a number of actions to remedy the injustice caused to the complainant and others affected. In addition to compensation, the Council devised an action plan and agreed to review its anti-social behaviour policy and to provide a report for members. In another complaint about antisocial behaviour the Council paid compensation of £250 to remedy the injustice caused by its failure to deal effectively with the complainant's reports of damage to a car.

There were two local settlements regarding benefits. In one, the complainant's council tax benefit disappeared from the computer system in April 2007 and his claim was not rebuilt until August. In the meantime he was taken to court for arrears. In the other complaint the Council took inappropriate recovery action in relation to a vulnerable person.

One complaint concerned delay by the Council in responding to the complainant's requests for an additional radiator. The medical evidence she had submitted to support the application had been overlooked. The Council agreed to do the work and to pay compensation.

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In a complaint about school admissions, there was delay in offering a school place to a child who had moved into the area and no appeal rights were explained after she had been refused a place in a school. There was inadequate record keeping and no educational support was provided in the period before a school place became available. In addition to the compensation, the Council introduced new procedures regarding casual admissions.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

During the year we referred 15 complaints back to the Council for consideration under its own complaints procedure. At over 40% of all decisions, that is considerably higher than the average for all authorities (27%).

I decided two complaints which had previously been sent back to the Council in this way, but where the complainants came back to us, dissatisfied with the Council's reply. In neither case did I find maladministration.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

When we make written enquiries to the Council we ask for a reply within 28 days. The average time taken by the Council to respond this year was just under 26 days.

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'. Again, 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.

Tony Redmond
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	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	3	6	0	2	8	6	8	5	1	39
2006 / 2007	1	1	1	1	12	14	3	2	2	37
2005 / 2006	1	6	3	5	14	8	5	7	5	54

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	7	0	0	7	5	3	15	22	37
2006 / 2007	0	7	0	0	14	3	6	14	30	44
2005 / 2006	0	7	0	0	8	9	7	19	31	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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	17	25.8
2006 / 2007	7	26.6
2005 / 2006	19	22.3

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