

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

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

Stroud District 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 Stroud District 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 17 complaints against your Council during the year, very similar to the number in the previous year.

Character

Eight of the complaints we received against your Council were about planning and building control and five about housing. Of the remaining four, two were about benefits, one about local taxation and the last about environmental health.

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).

Only one complaint was settled locally and no compensation was paid. The complainant was aggrieved that the Council had not considered alternative options other than the closure of garages, one of which he rented. The Council agreed to meet with him on site and to consider alternative options.

Other findings

Eighteen decisions were made on complaints. Six complaints were treated as premature and referred back to your Council so they could first be considered through your Council's complaints procedure.

Nine complaints were not pursued because there was insufficient evidence of maladministration, one because it was outside my jurisdiction and in one case I used my general discretion not to investigate the complaint.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The number of premature complaints is 33% which is higher than the national average of 27%. I would suggest that the Council keeps under review the publicity given to its complaints procedure to

ensure that complaints are considered before the complainant approaches the Ombudsman. But no maladministration was found in the four complaints that were resubmitted to me.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Enquiries were made on eight complaints and the average response time was 23.1 days which is now within the target of 28 days. This is a significant improvement on last year and I am grateful for the Council's hard work in this area.

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

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
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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	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	2	5	1	8	1	0	17
2006 / 2007	1	2	5	5	2	1	16
2005 / 2006	2	5	5	8	1	0	21

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	1	0	0	9	1	1	6	12	18
2006 / 2007	0	2	0	0	6	4	1	4	13	17
2005 / 2006	0	2	0	0	5	1	2	7	10	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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	8	23.1
2006 / 2007	10	30.0
2005 / 2006	6	26.0

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