



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter

Milton Keynes 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

We received 54 complaints in the year 2006/2007, a slight increase on the previous year but still less than the number received in 2004/2005. There was no service delivery area where complaints were particularly concentrated.

Decisions on complaints

During the year my office made decisions on 53 complaints against your authority. We found no maladministration in 13 complaints and we exercised discretion to close a further 6 without requiring any action by the Council. We found that 11 were outside jurisdiction.

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.

During the year my office settled seven complaints. I give below details of some of these.

One concerned school admissions. I am pleased to note that the Council was proactive in offering a new appeal hearing in response to my initial enquiries (and before I had come to any views as to whether or not there had been any fault). This removed any doubt about whether the complainant's reasons for believing his child should attend a particular school had been properly considered.

A second case concerned the Council's failure to recognise that the complainant had made a homelessness application by ticking a box on the medical form indicating that he was threatened with homelessness. As a result he remained in unsuitable temporary accommodation for about three months longer than he should. The Council agreed to pay the complainant £750 compensation; to remind officers that ticking this box on the medical form triggers duties under the Housing Act 1996 and to prepare guidelines for the District Medical Officer to use when assessing medical forms and applicants' priority. I am pleased to note the Council's willingness to settle the complaint as I proposed. It would be very helpful if I could receive a copy of the guidelines prepared by the Council.

Two complaints concerned housing benefit – one about delay by the Council in assessing claims and requests for backdating and a second about failure to amend a complainant's address details, as result of which an overpayment arose. The Council settled the former by paying a total of £244 compensation and the latter by waiving the overpayment. Again I am pleased to note that the Council was prompt in its willingness to settle the complaints and helpful to my Investigators. I also note that in August 2006 the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate reported on the Council's handling of benefit claims. The Inspectorate highlighted many examples of good practice and the Council's commitment to continually improving its processes and procedures.

One complaint concerned housing repairs and the Council's decision not to replace kitchen cabinets. This complaint had in fact been considered already by the Council through its own procedure, following a referral by me. Following my more formal involvement the Council agreed to review its decision, once it was drawn to their attention that not all relevant medical factors affecting a member of the complainant's household had been considered. I am particularly pleased to note that after my involvement ended, officers again reconsidered the matter in the light of its capital programme for meeting the Decent Homes Standard, and offered to replace completely the complainant's kitchen.

I issued one report against your Council. This concerned its failure to deal properly with anti-social behaviour affecting the complainant and with his transfer request. These matters had a serious impact on the complainant and in recognition of this I recommended and the Council agreed to pay the complainant compensation of £3,500, and an additional £750 to his mother who had pursued matters on his behalf. I also asked the Council to review its voids and lettings policy in respect of medical priority. I am pleased to note that it wrote to me subsequently to explain how it was doing this.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

My office referred 15 'premature complaints' to your authority for consideration, as we did not think you had had sufficient opportunity to deal with them through your own procedures. At 28% of all decisions this directly matches the national average.

Four premature complaints were resubmitted to me during the period. Of these, three are still open; I referred to the fourth above.

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 and 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. We have also successfully piloted a course on reviewing complaints for social services review panel members. 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

The target time for councils to respond when we make enquiries is 28 days. Your Council's average time to respond to enquiries was nearly 32 days. This is a welcome fall on the previous year's average but still outside my target time. I hope the Council can continue to improve its response times.

I have commented above on the proactive and helpful approach adopted by officers in settling complaints to the Ombudsman. My staff receive particular assistance from the Council's Information and Customer Liaison Manager. I and my staff continue to appreciate the high quality of responses to our enquiries.

Three of my staff recently met the Council's Information and Customer Liaison Manager and other senior staff. This was a useful opportunity to exchange information about a number of matters. I look forward to continuing this effective liaison.

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.

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 2007

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
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	4	3	10	12	10	8	4	1	54
2005 / 2006	2	1	4	2	12	6	6	3	6	42
2004 / 2005	0	5	5	6	27	14	7	4	6	74

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	1	7	0	0	13	6	11	15	38	53
2005 / 2006	0	9	0	0	13	7	8	11	37	48
2004 / 2005	0	7	0	0	11	15	11	19	44	63

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	19	31.7
2005 / 2006	19	35.0
2004 / 2005	23	31.4

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