



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
Salisbury District 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 Salisbury District Council 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**

### ***Volume***

We received 20 complaints during the year, a significant reduction on the 34 received in the previous year. However, as I noted in last year's letter, 17 complaints in 2006/07 related to one planning application, and so the number of issues complained about has been broadly similar year on year.

### ***Character***

Eight complaints were received about planning, and two about housing. Of the eight complaints in the "other" category, four were about land, three about environmental health and one about anti-social behaviour. Only one complaint was received about local taxation, and for the third year running none about housing benefit. This is commendable, suggesting well run services and good complaint handling and resolution in these Council functions. Housing benefit staff in particular should be proud of this enviable record.

## **Decisions on complaints**

### ***Reports and 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. Three complaints were settled locally. In one complaint, about antisocial behaviour, the Council took steps to secure an alternative access for the complainant to remove problems which were the cause of difficulties between the two neighbours. It also agreed to erect suitable fencing. My investigator decided that these steps achieved a suitable settlement of the complaint without the need for compensation. In a complaint about environmental health, the Council agreed to pay the complainant £100 to reflect failure to keep him informed of events and to take account of the time and trouble he had spent pursuing the complaint. The remaining complaint raised no issues of particular interest and did not involve the payment of compensation, so the total compensation paid was £100, a significant reduction on the £1450 paid last year. I am grateful to the Council for its assistance in settling these complaints.

When we complete an investigation we must issue a report. I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

### ***Other findings***

Twenty three complaints were decided during the year. Of these six were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Nine complaints were premature and, as I mentioned earlier, three were settled

locally. The remaining five were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them.

### **Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints**

The number of premature complaints (nine) is relatively high when set against the number of incoming complaints (20). This suggests that the Council's complaints process may not be sufficiently visible to customers or that staff, when dealing with requests for assistance, do not signpost the complaints process for customers who remain unhappy with what the Council has done.

In last year's letter I said

"I hope the Council will look at the way it deals with complaints on its website. No obvious way to make a complaint online could be found. I did find a complaints form which could be downloaded, but which could not be re-submitted electronically. The facility to make a complaint or pay a compliment quickly and easily electronically is valued by citizens and I hope that the Council will consider ways of allowing this to happen."

As far as I can tell, the situation remains unchanged and I hope that the Council will now look carefully at ways of helping customers make complaints quickly and effectively via its web site, clearly signposting the facility from the home page and providing an electronic complaint form.

Greater visibility here will no doubt help the Council achieve early resolution of citizens' grievances. I say this because, of the nine complaints referred back to you as premature, none was resubmitted to me. This is commendable, and strongly suggests that when complaints do reach the appropriate people in the organisation they work hard to resolve them.

### **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. In addition to the generic Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution) 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.

We delivered the effective complaints handling course at the Council on 5 June 2007. I hope this was useful. If we can provide any further training for you please let Stephen Purser, the Assistant Ombudsman, know.

### **Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman**

We made enquiries on three complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 40 days, increase on the 33 days it took last year. I have no doubt that the way my enquiries are dealt with centrally by the Council could be improved. I hope the Council will improve its' response times here, particularly given the relatively low number of enquiries I made of the Council.

No one from the Council has attended the annual link officer seminar recently and you may wish to consider sending someone to the seminar to be held later in November. If so, please let Stephen Purser know and he will arrange for an invitation to be sent.

I was pleased to welcome two officers from your Council to the seminar I gave at County Hall on 6 December. I hope the officers found it useful.

## **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 we work and again we will keep you informed as relevant.

We have just issued a special report that draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for phone masts considered under the prior approval system, which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the problems that can occur.

A further special report will be published in July focusing on the difficulties that can be encountered when complaints are received by local authorities about services delivered through a partnership. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* sets out our advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by adopting good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

## **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 No 2**  
**Westwood Way**  
**Westwood Business Park**  
**Coventry**  
**CV4 8JB**

**June 2007**

Enc: Statistical data  
Note on interpretation of statistics  
Details of training courses

<b>Complaints received by subject area</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Transport and highways</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	2	8	8	1	1	<b>20</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	2	6	26	0	0	<b>34</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	5	4	23	1	3	<b>36</b>

**Note:** these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

<b>Decisions</b>	<b>MI reps</b>	<b>LS</b>	<b>M reps</b>	<b>NM reps</b>	<b>No mal</b>	<b>Omb disc</b>	<b>Outside jurisdiction</b>	<b>Premature complaints</b>	<b>Total excl premature</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	0	3	0	0	4	1	6	9	14	<b>23</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	21	0	0	8	5	3	5	37	<b>42</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	0	1	0	0	5	8	5	8	19	<b>27</b>

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

<b>Response times</b>	<b>FIRST ENQUIRIES</b>	
	<b>No. of First Enquiries</b>	<b>Avg no. of days to respond</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	3	40.7
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	11	33.5
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	16	33.4

**Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007**

<b>Types of authority</b>	<b>&lt;= 28 days %</b>	<b>29 - 35 days %</b>	<b>&gt;= 36 days %</b>
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