



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

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

In 2006 -7 I received nine complaints against your authority. This represents a significant decrease on the previous year and is very low given the range of services the Council provides.

The decrease was evident across most service areas but was greatest in Transport and Highways and Education. The numbers of complaints involved are small and I do not attach any particular significance to these fluctuations, which I expect to find from year to year. Even so, the fall is welcome to me and, I'm sure, to the Council.

Decisions on complaints

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 2006-7 I made decisions on fifteen complaints, excluding premature complaints. I did not issue any reports against your Council. Three complaints were upheld wholly or in part but remedied by way of local settlement. In one of these I upheld some parts of a complaint about Adult Care Services. I concluded that the Council did not explain to the complainant the details of a complaint it was investigating against her under its Adult Protection procedures. It also did not give her the outcome in writing and delayed in completing the complaints procedure. I was pleased that the Council recognised that it was partly at fault and agreed to pay the complainant £1000 compensation for her distress and anxiety. It also reviewed its Adult Protection and complaints procedures, making several improvements for future users.

I upheld a complaint about Children and Family Services where the Council had delayed for eight months in implementing the decision of a Review Panel to carry out a reassessment of the needs of the complainant's son who had Asperger's Syndrome. The Council also delayed in completing the complaints process. The complainant had experienced a great deal of frustration and anxiety during this process. She had employed a solicitor to assist her and she incurred transport costs for the 150 mile round trip to her son's school. Her son also lost some support while he was at home during the school holidays. The Council paid 50% of her solicitor's costs, a transport allowance covering four return trips to the school and agreed to provide extra support to her son during the next holiday period.

In the third complaint the Council delayed in referring the complainant to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and failed to properly consider her needs as a child in care. The Council agreed to involve the complainant in pathway planning, to progress contact with her siblings and consider safeguards for visits.

In total the Council agreed to pay compensation totalling £1,650 in respect of complaints brought to me.

In six complaints I discontinued my investigation because there was no or insufficient maladministration, in another three I exercised my discretion to discontinue my investigation and a further three complaints were outside my jurisdiction.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

With the two exceptions referred to above in respect of the social services complaints procedures, the Council's corporate complaints procedure worked well during the year. Complaints seem to have been dealt with appropriately and within the timescales laid down. It was helpful to see the Council's report providing an overview of complaints received by all the Council's services for 2005 -06 and how the information was used to make service improvements.

In 2006-07 I referred one premature complaint to the Council for it to consider, one fewer than the previous year. I am not aware of any problem in the way the Council followed up this complaint. The information on the Council's website about its complaints procedure remains very clear and expansive.

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

My staff continued to have a positive working relationship with the Council's officers during the year. One of my Assistant Ombudsmen, Ms Jones, attended the Council's Corporate Services Scrutiny

Panel to answer any questions Members had about last year's annual letter. I hope you found this useful.

I note this year there was an increase in the Council's average response times to our first enquiries. I am aware that there was a delay in one case due to the loss of our enquiry letter, but even when taking this case out of the figures the Council's average response time increased to 30.8 days. I appreciate that this is only slightly outside our target time of 28 days but I would welcome any improvements the Council can make to this figure.

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.

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
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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	Children and family services	Education	Other	Planning & building control	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	0	1	2	0	4	9
2005 / 2006	3	2	5	2	0	9	21
2004 / 2005	5	2	0	2	1	3	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
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	3	0	0	6	3	3	1	15	16
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	5	4	0	2	10	12
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	6	5	3	2	15	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
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	6	37.5
2005 / 2006	7	24.3
2004 / 2005	8	26.9

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