



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

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

There has been a substantial reduction in the number of complaints against your Council, down to 37 from 54 last year. The fall is evident across a number of service areas: benefits, children and family services, education, housing, public finance, transport and highways, planning and building control. There has been an increase in the "other" category and this includes eight complaints about antisocial behaviour.

Of the complaints about housing, tenancy management and housing repairs were the most common.

Decisions on complaints

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.

I issued no reports against the Council and I decided seven complaints as local settlements. Compensation paid by the Council on these complaints was just over £2,500 in total.

Two of the settled complaints were about antisocial behaviour. In one, the Council responded quickly to my contact and arranged to visit the complainant's neighbour. In the other complaint, the Council had accepted fault and paid compensation for its serious delay in dealing with antisocial behaviour, but it agreed to increase the compensation by £1,600 in line with a suggestion from my office.

I also settled two complaints about housing benefit: in the first, the complainant received a court summons because of the Council's earlier failure to deal properly with the verification of the complainant's son's student exemption. In the second the Council well exceeded the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's guideline timescales for investigating possible fraudulent claims.

Two complaints about tenancy management matters were also settled, as was a complaint in which the Council agreed to correct factual inaccuracies in information it held about a complainant who it had considered to be potentially violent.

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Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

During the year my office referred 14 complaints back to the Council to be dealt with under its complaints procedures. We also decided four complaints which had previously been referred back to the Council in this way, but where the complainants had resubmitted their complaints to us. Two of those resulted in local settlements, one of which (as mentioned above) resulted in significant additional compensation for the complainant.

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

When I visited the Council in April 2006 I gave presentations to officers and members about the developing role of the Ombudsman. All concerned seemed to accept that complaint handling is an important element of customer feedback and I was left with the impression that there is a real commitment to improve services in this way. I was pleased to learn that the Audit Commission had awarded the Council a "good" rating.

The time taken by the Council to reply to my written enquiries continues to exceed the standard which I set. The average time was 26.6 days compared with the standard of 28 days.

I was pleased that a council officer attended a Link Officer seminar which we held in November and I am grateful for her feedback that the day was most informative.

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.

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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.

Tony Redmond
Local Government Ombudsman
10th floor, Millbank Tower
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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	1	1	1	1	12	14	3	2	2	37
2005 / 2006	1	6	3	5	14	8	5	7	5	54
2004 / 2005	2	3	3	5	12	7	6	6	2	46

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	7	0	0	14	3	6	14	30	44
2005 / 2006	0	7	0	0	8	9	7	19	31	50
2004 / 2005	0	7	0	0	13	15	8	10	43	53

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	7	26.6
2005 / 2006	19	22.3
2004 / 2005	19	30.9

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