



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
South Oxfordshire 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 South Oxfordshire 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 25 complaints during the year, broadly similar to incoming complaints in the two previous years.

Character

Fourteen complaints were received in the planning and building control category, but six of these complaints were submitted by the same complainant. Four complaints were about housing benefit, four were about public finance and three complaints were received in the 'other' category, two of which were about commercial activities and one about advertising on roundabouts.

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. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

One complaint was settled locally. The Council agreed to pay compensation of £50 for its delay in re-assessing housing benefit and offered to make a home visit to assist the complainant in claiming benefit if she started work. I am grateful to the Council for its assistance in settling this complaint.

I did not issue any reports against your Council in the year 2006-07.

Other findings

Twenty-seven complaints were decided during the year. Of these, seven were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Seven complaints were premature, and, as I mentioned earlier, one was settled locally. Of the remaining 12, eight were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen and in a further four cases I exercised my discretion not to pursue them mainly because no significant injustice flowed from the fault alleged.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The number of premature complaints (seven) shows an increase on the number received last year (three). Even so, the proportion of premature complaints remains below the national average. The Council advertises its complaints procedure clearly on its website and explains each stage. I am pleased to note that the website helpfully contains a hyperlink to the Commission's website to assist complainants and signposts the role of the Planning Inspectorate and the Standards Board for England.

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.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on eight complaints this year and the average time for responding was 31.5 days, a decrease on the 33.6 days the Council took last year. While I welcome this improvement, the Council's response times still fall short of our target time of 28 days. The Council's responses are usually comprehensive but it does need to improve the speed of its responses, and I look forward to further improvement in the coming year.

I was pleased to welcome Members and officers from your Council to the seminar I gave at Vale of White Horse District Council on 27 June 2006. I hope they 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
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
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	4	0	3	14	4	0	25
2005 / 2006	1	1	2	12	2	2	20
2004 / 2005	0	2	2	16	4	0	24

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	1	0	0	8	4	7	7	20	27
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	9	1	5	3	18	21
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	9	6	4	2	20	22

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	8	31.5
2005 / 2006	8	33.6
2004 / 2005	9	31.2

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