



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Stoke on Trent City 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 Stoke on Trent City 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 68 complaints during the year, a similar number to the previous year. You will remember that in last year's letter I commented on the reduction in complaint numbers and I am happy to see that the number of complaints received has remained at this lower level.

Character

Seven complaints were received about planning, seven about local taxation, six about transport and highways, three about adult care services and four about children and family services. Of the 15 complaints in the other category, four were about land, two about environmental health, two about anti-social behaviour and two about waste management. The remaining complaints were about other more specific issues. We did not receive any complaints about education admissions or exclusions suggesting good complaint-handling and resolution in these important Council functions. We received 22 complaints about housing, a significant increase on the ten received in the previous year. This may be an area where the Council wishes to focus on complaint-handling in the coming year to see if any improvements can be made.

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.

In this complaint there was considerable delay by the Council in dealing with a housing benefit appeal and overpayment. The Council settled the complaint by working out the complainant's correct entitlement and making a compensation payment of £500. I am pleased to note that the Council readily accepted the faults in this case and that the agreement to settle was swiftly agreed.

In another case, the Council had agreed a payment of £30 but eight months after we closed the complaint the payment had still not been paid. After we contacted the Council the payment was made and further compensation in the form of three months' free parking was also offered. I hope that systems are now in place to ensure that delays of this type do not occur in the future.

I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

Sixty-one complaints were decided during the year. Of these, 12 were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Twenty one complaints were premature and, as I mentioned earlier, one was settled locally. The remaining 27 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 (21) is relatively high when set against the number of incoming complaints (61). Last year I commented on the fact that the number of premature complaints had fallen and so I am concerned to note that the number has again risen to about a third of all complaints. 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.

Of the 21 complaints referred back to you as premature, four were resubmitted to me. This is commendable, and 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 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.

We delivered the effective complaints handling course at the Council on 21 November 2006. I hope this was useful. If we can provide any further training for you please let Barbara Hedley, Assistant Ombudsman, know.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on 20 complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 43 days, an increase on the 37 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 now reduce its response times here. These figures are well above our target response time of 28 days and it is important to complainants that responses are made promptly.

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
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June 2007

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

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	3	4	4	0	22	15	7	7	6	68
2005 / 2006	1	14	2	1	10	18	8	5	10	69
2004 / 2005	4	7	3	4	15	26	11	4	7	81

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	19	8	12	21	40	61
2005 / 2006	0	9	0	0	22	14	7	16	52	68
2004 / 2005	0	14	0	0	24	12	9	29	59	88

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	20	43.0
2005 / 2006	33	36.5
2004 / 2005	32	40.0

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