



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
Telford & Wrekin 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**

### ***Volume***

In the year to 31 March 2007 my office received 25 complaints against your Council, a fall from 33 in the previous year. The number remains small, given the number of decisions the Council makes on behalf of its citizens each year, and we expect to see these fluctuations over time.

### ***Character***

Eleven of the 25 complaints I received concerned planning and building control matters. I do not attach any particular significance to this, noting that it is only one more complaint than I received in this category last year. The number of complaints about other service areas is too small to allow for any significant conclusions to be drawn.

## **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 am pleased that, once again, I had no cause to issue a report against the Council.

There were two local settlements. In one case, the Council failed to tell the complainant why it had decided not to investigate his complaints about illegal parking. Although the Council's decision was justified, its failure to keep the complainant informed caused him avoidable uncertainty. In settlement of the complaint the Council wrote to the complainant to explain why it had declined to investigate and to update him on the current situation.

The other case involved an allegation that your officers had failed to take action requested of them by the Plans Board. The complainant alleged that officers had been asked to examine ways to mitigate the effect of a new access road on his property. Although I did not find that the officers had acted as alleged, the Council did make a further site visit in the course of the investigation, following which it agreed to take measures to discourage misuse of the road.

In neither case did I have cause to recommend that the Council pay compensation to the complainants.

## ***Other findings***

We made decisions on 26 complaints in 2006/07. In addition to the two local settlements mentioned above, four complaints were outside my jurisdiction, in ten I found no evidence of maladministration and I used my discretion to discontinue the investigation of one further complaint. The remaining nine complaints were referred back to you to be considered through the Council's own complaints procedure.

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

In my last annual letter, I said that the number of premature complaints I had received indicated that the Council may find it helpful to review the publicity it gives to its complaints procedure. This year, the proportion of premature complaints actually increased. Although I welcome the fact that your website now includes a link to an online complaint form from the homepage, you may wish to consider further how to make your complaints procedure more accessible to service users.

## **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 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. In April and June of last year we delivered Effective Complaints Handling courses to some of your staff, which I hope they found useful.

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 initial enquiries on ten complaints in 2006/07. Although this was only one more than in the previous year, the length of time it took the Council to respond increased significantly. At 47.9 days, the average response time is well in excess of what I regard as acceptable. The Council should now take urgent steps to respond to enquiries from my office more speedily, and return to its excellent performance in 2005/06.

The standard of the responses themselves is generally good, and my officers feel that they have an effective relationship with the Council. I note that my office was consulted on your draft social services complaints procedure and that Mrs Hedley, one of my Assistant Ombudsmen made comments and suggested some amendments to it. I hope this was 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 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**  
**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	Adult care services	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Social Services - other	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	1	0	0	2	7	11	2	0	1	25
2005 / 2006	1	0	1	1	4	11	10	1	1	3	33
2004 / 2005	1	0	1	4	3	8	6	2	0	6	31

**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	2	0	0	10	1	4	9	17	26
2005 / 2006	0	2	0	0	10	4	6	9	22	31
2004 / 2005	0	4	0	0	9	4	7	8	24	32

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	10	47.9
2005 / 2006	9	27.6
2004 / 2005	15	38.3

**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