



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
Vale of White Horse 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 Vale of White Horse 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 six complaints during the year, a significant reduction on the 13 received in the previous year. We do, though, expect to see these fluctuations overtime.

### ***Character***

Three complaints were received about planning, and two about housing. We also received one complaint in the "other" category, about an application for a porch on a caravan site. We did not receive any complaints about benefits this year or last year. This is commendable and suggests a particularly well run service and good complaint handling and resolution in this Council function.

## **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.

I did not issue any reports against your Council in 2006-07 or recommend that any complaints should be locally settled. This has now been the case for more than three years and I congratulate the Council on its exemplary performance in this area.

In 2006-07 we decided 10 complaints. Three were outside my jurisdiction and we referred a further two back to the Council to deal with because they were premature. Of the remaining five complaints I found no or insufficient evidence of maladministration.

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

There were two premature complaints in 2006-07 compared to four in the previous year. One was resubmitted to my office and determined during the year. Although the complainant was not satisfied with the Council's consideration of their complaint we found no evidence of maladministration. The figure for premature complaints is low and is below the national average for Council's as a whole. This suggests that the Council publicises and operates its complaints procedure effectively.

## **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 two complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 21 days. This is well within our target time of 28 days and I commend the Council for providing prompt and comprehensive responses.

I am grateful to your Council for hosting a County seminar for Oxfordshire Councils on 27 June 2006 which my Assistant Ombudsman, Reynold Stephen, and I attended. The feedback we received from you indicated that the Oxfordshire Councils found this to be useful in enabling Members and officers to obtain a better understanding of my role and of our role in complaint handling.

## **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  
Details of training courses

<b>Complaints received by subject area</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	2	1	3	0	<b>6</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	1	1	10	1	<b>13</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	1	0	9	0	<b>10</b>

**Note:** these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

<b>Decisions</b>	<b>MI reps</b>	<b>LS</b>	<b>M reps</b>	<b>NM reps</b>	<b>No mal</b>	<b>Omb disc</b>	<b>Outside jurisdiction</b>	<b>Premature complaints</b>	<b>Total excl premature</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	0	0	0	0	5	0	3	2	8	<b>10</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	0	0	0	4	3	1	4	8	<b>12</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	0	0	0	0	3	1	2	3	6	<b>9</b>

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

<b>Response times</b>	<b>FIRST ENQUIRIES</b>	
	<b>No. of First Enquiries</b>	<b>Avg no. of days to respond</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	2	21.0
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	2	18.0
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	5	19.6

**Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007**

<b>Types of authority</b>	<b>&lt;= 28 days %</b>	<b>29 - 35 days %</b>	<b>&gt;= 36 days %</b>
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