

Local Government  
**OMBUDSMAN**

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

**Coventry City Council**

**for the year ended  
31 March 2008**

**The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) provides a free, independent and impartial service. We consider complaints about the administrative actions of councils and some other authorities. We cannot question what a council has done simply because someone does not agree with it. If we find something has gone wrong, such as poor service, service failure, delay or bad advice, and that a person has suffered as a result, the Ombudsmen aim to get it put right by recommending a suitable remedy. 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 2007/08 - Introduction**

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about Coventry City Council. We have included comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements, where possible, so they can assist with your 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.

Two attachments 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**

In 2007/08, I received 73 complaints against your Council. This represents a slight increase on the 59 complaints I received in the previous year. I received seven complaints about education when I had received none in the previous year. Complaints about housing fell from six to one. Otherwise the distribution of complaints remained broadly similar to previous years.

## **Decisions on complaints**

During the year, we made decisions on 79 complaints against your authority. We found no maladministration in 25 complaints, and we exercised discretion to close a further 14 without requiring action by the Council. We found that nine were outside my jurisdiction.

## ***Reports and local settlements***

A 'local settlement' is a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, the Council has agreed to take some action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint. The investigation is then discontinued. In 2007/08 the Local Government Ombudsmen determined 27% of complaints by local settlement (excluding 'premature' complaints - where councils have not had a proper chance to deal with them - and those outside our jurisdiction).

I issued one report against your Council. The Council removed the complainant's car from the highway as it considered it to be abandoned. It then wrongly assessed the value of the car to be below £1,000 and so crushed it immediately. The Council failed to tell the DVLA that the car had been destroyed and the complainant was fined £100 for not taxing it. The Council acknowledged it was at fault and agreed to pay the complainant £1,780 to reflect the value of the car at the time it was removed and her costs and time and trouble. The Council had already adopted a new policy on abandoned vehicles; it agreed to bring forward a review of this policy in the light of the lessons learned from this complaint.

My office settled 10 complaints. The Council's action to settle complaints included the payment of compensation totalling just over £3,000. I give below details of some of the settlements.

/...

Three complaints concerned problems with school admission appeal hearings. The information provided to the appeal panels by the Council was inadequate, panels did not consider whether the admissions criteria had been applied correctly and the notes of the hearings were insufficiently detailed. The Council settled all three complaints by agreeing to arrange re-hearings with different panels and different clerks.

Two complaints concerned highways matters. In one the Council failed to ensure a contractor put up proper signs warning of a road closure. Local businesses were not notified of the closure. The complainant considered his business may have been adversely affected. The Council agreed to pay compensation of £1,000 and to revise its procedures to ensure road closures are signed properly. In the second complaint the Council had not properly applied its domestic footways and crossings policy. It agreed to halve the cost to the complainant of installing a dropped kerb.

One complaint concerned the Council's actions in sending an offer of accommodation to the complainant's old address. She lost the chance to accept the offer and lived in overcrowded conditions for 10 months longer than she might have done. The Council agreed to pay £1,200 compensation.

One complaint concerned the Council's failure to pay housing benefit direct to the complainant, a landlord, despite its agreement to do so. The complainant was unable to recover this money from the tenant. The Council had already paid some compensation. It agreed to increase this to meet the full value of the lost rent.

Finally one complaint concerned 10 months delay by the Council in identifying the need for and in providing a hydraulic bath chair. The Council agreed to pay £750 compensation and to carry out some further works in the complainant's bathroom.

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

During the past year, my office referred 20 'premature complaints' to your Council for consideration, as we did not believe that you had had a full opportunity to deal with them through your own procedures. At 25% of all decisions, this was slightly below the national average and represents a reduction on the previous year. I hope that this reflects a greater awareness of the Council's own complaints procedure.

During the year seven premature complaints were resubmitted to me. I did not uphold five of these and found one to be outside my jurisdiction. One complaint is yet to be decided.

### **Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman**

The Council's average time for responding to first enquiries was 22 days. This was a reduction on the average time in the previous year and is now comfortably within my target time of 28 days. My staff have commented on the helpful and prompt responses by the Council and also its willingness to propose or agree to settlements of complaints. I am very grateful for the Council's assistance here.

### **Training in complaint handling**

Part of our role is to provide advice and guidance about good administrative practice. We offer training courses for all levels of local authority staff in complaints handling and investigation. This year we carried out a detailed evaluation of the training with councils that have been trained over the past three years. The results are 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 and a course on reviewing complaints for social care review panel members. We can run open courses for groups of staff from different 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.

During the year we ran a course on Effective Complaint Handling for your officers which I hope you found useful. I have enclosed some information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings.

### **LGO developments**

We launched the LGO Advice Team in April, providing a first contact service for all enquirers and new complainants. Demand for the service has been high. Our team of advisers, trained to provide comprehensive information and advice, has dealt with many thousands of calls since the service started.

The team handles complaints submitted by telephone, email or text, as well as in writing. This new power to accept complaints other than in writing was one of the provisions of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, which also came into force in April. Our experience of implementing other provisions in the Act, such as complaints about service failure and apparent maladministration, is being kept under review and will be subject to further discussion. Any feedback from your Council would be welcome.

Last year we published two special reports providing advice and guidance on 'applications for prior approval of telecommunications masts' and 'citizen redress in local partnerships'. Again I would appreciate your feedback on these, particularly on any complaints protocols put in place as part of the overall governance arrangements for partnerships your Council has set up.

## **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**  
**10<sup>th</sup> floor, Millbank Tower**  
**Millbank**  
**London SW1P 4QP**

**June 2008**

Enc: Statistical data  
Note on interpretation of statistics  
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

<b>Complaints received by subject area</b>	<b>Adult care services</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Children and family services</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Social Services - other</b>	<b>Transport and highways</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	0	9	8	7	1	13	12	11	0	12	<b>73</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	6	8	4	0	6	13	7	8	0	7	<b>59</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	5	10	4	5	2	10	13	8	2	4	<b>63</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>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	1	10	0	0	25	14	9	20	59	<b>79</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	0	12	0	0	12	4	8	20	36	<b>56</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	8	0	0	13	5	13	17	39	<b>56</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>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	29	22.0
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	26	29.1
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	17	34.1

**Average local authority response times 01/04/2007 to 31/03/2008**

<b>Types of authority</b>	<b>&lt;= 28 days %</b>	<b>29 - 35 days %</b>	<b>&gt; = 36 days %</b>
District Councils	56.4	24.6	19.1
Unitary Authorities	41.3	50.0	8.7
Metropolitan Authorities	58.3	30.6	11.1
County Councils	47.1	38.2	14.7
London Boroughs	45.5	27.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	71.4	28.6	0.0