

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

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

South Northamptonshire 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 South Northamptonshire 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

Volume

We received 13 complaints this year, exactly the same as last year. Overall, complaint numbers remain low.

Character

The nature of complaints is broadly similar to previous years. We received the same number of complaints about housing (four) and slightly more complaints about planning issues (six as opposed to four last year). The remaining three complaints were about benefits, public finance and the condition of a pathway for which the Council has responsibility to maintain.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

When we complete an investigation we issue a report. I issued no reports this year.

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 some 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).

Two investigations were discontinued as a result of a local settlement being agreed during the course of the year. The first of these concerned the Council's response to complaints about anti-social behaviour and a concurrent request for a housing transfer. During the course of the investigation the Council used its discretion to increase the complainant's priority for a move and offered her alternative accommodation, which helped to resolve the complaint (while still investigating the outstanding allegations of anti-social behaviour and taking action to redress this).

The second complaint concerned delay in referring a dispute about benefit entitlement to the independent Appeals Service which considers such matters. The Council agreed to improve staff training, so more of its officers could deal with appeals, and paid £50 compensation to the complainant for the delay in this instance.

I thank the Council for its co-operation in enabling these complaints to be satisfactorily resolved.

Other findings

In addition to the above, I made a further ten decisions on complaints this year. In one case I decided the complaint was premature and I referred this back to the Council to deal with. In three cases I decided that the complaint was outside my jurisdiction to investigate. In three others I decided there was no, or insufficient, evidence of maladministration on the part of the Council. And in the remaining three cases I exercised my discretion not to investigate, generally because there was insufficient evidence that the complainant had suffered injustice.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

No complaints were resubmitted to me this year after I initially decided they were premature. This suggests that the Council is generally able to resolve complaints satisfactorily when it is asked to do so. In addition, the low number of premature complaints suggests the Council is publicising its complaint process effectively.

I note the Council's complaint process remains accessible via its website. The only suggestion I can make for improvement is that the Council makes this more visible; for example through providing a link direct from the homepage to the "compliments and complaints" section.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Enquiries were made on six complaints this year. The Council's response times averaged 30.2 days to respond, against the target of 28 days. This is a decline in its performance from last year when enquiries were replied to in an average 26.3 days. However, the situation is considerably better than two years ago when responses were averaging 42 days and I trust the Council will work hard to improve again in this area in the coming year.

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.

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, have 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'. 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.

J R White
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June 2008

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	1	4	0	6	1	1	13
2006 / 2007	2	4	2	4	1	0	13
2005 / 2006	0	7	4	6	4	0	21

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	0	2	0	0	3	3	3	1	11	12
2006 / 2007	0	1	0	0	3	2	3	4	9	13
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	8	3	2	7	16	23

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	6	30.2
2006 / 2007	3	26.3
2005 / 2006	11	42.3

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

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	>= 36 days %
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