

Local Government OMBUDSMAN

The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter South Oxfordshire District 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 Oxfordshire District 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 16 complaints during the year, a significant reduction on the previous year. We expect to see these fluctuations over time.

Character

Nine complaints related to planning and building control and two were about public finance. The remaining five were classed as 'other', two of them being about drainage.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

When we complete an investigation we issue a report. I did not issue any reports against your Council in the year 2007-08.

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).

One complaint was settled locally. The Council agreed to remedy its delay in a complicated and long-running planning complaint by putting the issue to members, and paying the complainant £250 for his time and trouble in pursuing the complaint. I am grateful to the Council for its assistance in settling this complaint.

Other findings

Seventeen complaints were decided during the year. Of these, three were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Four were premature and, as I mentioned above, one was settled locally. Of the remaining nine, seven were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration could be seen. In a further two cases I exercised my discretion not to pursue the complaint further mainly because no significant injustice flowed from the fault alleged.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The number of premature complaints (four) shows a reduction on the number received last year (seven). This is below the national average of 27% and may reflect the clear way the Council explains

its complaints procedure on its website. I am pleased to note that the website helpfully contains a hyperlink to the Commission's website to assist complainants, and signposts the role of the Planning Inspectorate and the Standards Board for England.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on six complaints this year and the average time for responding was 29.5 days. This is a slight improvement on last year but falls slightly short of our target time of 28 days. However, one Council response took 43 days and this had a significant impact on the average response time. The Council's responses are generally comprehensive and I hope that the increased use of email and scanned documents will enable the Council to continue the gradual improvement in its response times 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 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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18 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	0	0	5	9	2	0	16
2006 / 2007	4	0	3	14	4	0	25
2005 / 2006	1	1	2	12	2	2	20

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	1	0	0	7	2	3	4	13	17
2006 / 2007	0	1	0	0	8	4	7	7	20	27
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	9	1	5	3	18	21

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	29.5
2006 / 2007	8	31.5
2005 / 2006	8	33.6

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