

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

### **Volume**

In 2007-8 we received five complaints against your Council, compared to 13 in 2006/07 and 16 the year before. It is pleasing to record that so few of your residents found it necessary to complain to me.

### **Character**

In 2007-8, two complaints were about planning and building control, two about public finance and the other about drainage. Where complaint numbers are so low it is not possible to provide meaningful information about trends.

## **Decisions on complaints**

### **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 one complaint out of ten by local settlement (excluding 'premature' complaints - where councils have not had a proper chance to deal with them - and those outside our jurisdiction). When we completed an investigation we issued a report. I issued no reports against your Council in 2007-8.

The Council settled one complaint, where it failed to submit to Committee the complainant's objections to a planning application and failed to allow him to address the Committee, although he was listed to do so. The Council remedied the complaint by postponing the decision on the application so that the complainant could address a subsequent Committee meeting. The Council also apologised and paid the complainant £100 in recognition of his time and trouble in making the complaint.

### **Other findings**

I determined a total of eleven complaints against your Council in 2007/08. In addition to the complaint that the Council settled, one was premature, one outside my jurisdiction and in six cases I found no or insufficient evidence of maladministration. In a further two cases I exercised my discretion not to investigate. This is a similar picture to 2006-7.

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

In my annual letter for 2006/07 I congratulated the Council on the accessibility of its complaints procedure. I am pleased to say that the number of premature complaints I received fell again, to just one. This indicates that the Council's corporate complaints procedure is readily accessible to its citizens. And all the indicators are that the procedure itself works well.

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

I expect councils to reply to my initial enquiries within 28 days. In 2007/08 I made enquiries on five complaints, and I am pleased to report that the Council met this target in each case, with an average of just 19.2 days to respond. This is an excellent performance and represents a slight improvement on the figure for 2006/07.

## **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  
Local Government Ombudsman  
The Oaks No 2  
Westwood Way  
Westwood Business Park  
COVENTRY CV4 8JB**

**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>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	0	1	2	2	<b>5</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	1	3	7	2	<b>13</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	1	6	7	2	<b>16</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>	0	1	0	0	6	2	1	1	10	<b>11</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	0	0	0	0	5	1	1	3	7	<b>10</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	1	1	0	0	3	2	2	7	9	<b>16</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>	5	19.2
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	5	20.6
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	6	30.2

**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