



21 June 2006

Mr John Best
Chief Executive Officer
Milton Keynes Council
DX 31406
MILTON KEYNES

The Commission for
Local Administration in England

Tony Redmond
Local Government Ombudsman

Peter MacMahon
Deputy Ombudsman

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Dear Mr Best

Annual Letter 2005/06

I am writing to give you my reflections on the complaints received against your authority and dealt with by my office over the last year. I hope that in reviewing your own performance you will find this letter a useful addition to other information you hold highlighting how people experience or perceive your services.

This year we will publish all our annual letters on our website (www.lgo.org.uk) and share them with the Audit Commission. There is widespread support from authorities for us to do this. We will wait for four weeks after this letter before doing so, to give you an opportunity to consider the letter first. If a letter is found to contain any factual inaccuracy we will reissue it.

In addition to the narrative below 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

We received 42 complaints in the year, a fall of almost half from the year before. There was a noticeable drop in the number of complaints about housing, although these still represented nearly a third of the total. Other complaints were spread fairly evenly across other services.

Decisions on complaints

We decided 48 complaints, eight of which were outside my jurisdiction.

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Reports and local settlements

When we complete an investigation we must issue a report. There is a significant proportion of investigations that do not reach this stage. This is because we settle the complaint during the course of our investigation. We call these decisions "local settlements". Nine complaints were settled and I again issued no reports. So there was evidence of fault in 31% of all complaints decided (excluding complaints outside my jurisdiction or those referred back to the Council). This exceeds the national average of 27%.

Of the nine settlements, five were about housing issues, one related to council tax benefit, one to planning and two to land. The Council paid a total of £2,510 in compensation.

One case involved an error in the conveyance of the flat above the complainant. The Council transferred the freehold to the owner instead of a lease. The Council acknowledged the error immediately enquiries were made and offered to settle the complaint with payments to reflect increased costs and legal fees and time and trouble for the complainant in pursuing the matter. This amounted to £980 in compensation.

In another complaint involving nuisance from a play area, the Council was proactive in trying to resolve matters and erected a fence round the play area to prevent damage to the complainant's property.

In a serious and distressing case where a flat had not been cleaned adequately after the suicide of the son of the complainant, the Council dealt promptly with the complaint when it was brought to your attention, you apologised to the complainant personally and agreed to make a payment of £400 to a charity of the complainant's choice as a gesture of goodwill.

A complaint from a residents' association about inadequate consultation and information about refurbishment works on an estate resulted in a round the table meeting with the Council, residents' association and our investigator. Following this meeting, it was possible to settle this complaint.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

11 complaints were referred back to your Council as premature. This is 23% of all decisions, a bit lower than the national average of 27%. Three of these complaints have been resubmitted to our office during the year because the complainant was dissatisfied with the Council's response. We have closed two of these, one as there was no evidence of fault and one as a local settlement. One is still being considered. This suggests your Council continues to deal effectively with complaints we refer back to be dealt with under your complaints procedure.

Your Council has continued to be proactive in proposing settlements of complaints. Investigators comment on the willingness of your complaints officer to pursue settlements energetically. This is appreciated by our office and complainants.

In the 19 cases where we have made enquiries the average time to respond has risen slightly to 35 days which is above our target of 28 days. However investigators continue to comment on the high quality of responses which are comprehensive and thorough.

Training in complaint handling

Our training in complaint handling is proving very popular with authorities and we continue to receive very positive feedback from participants. Over the last year we have delivered more than 100 courses from the range of three courses that we now offer as part of our role in promoting good administrative practice.

Effective Complaint Handling was the first course we developed, aimed at staff who deal with complaints as a significant part of their job. Since then we have introduced courses in complaint handling for front line staff and in handling social services complaints.

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 range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and bookings.

Conclusions/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. I would again very much welcome any comments you may have on the form and content of the letter.

I would again be happy to consider requests for myself or a senior colleague to visit the Council to present and discuss the letter with councillors or staff. We will do our best to meet the requests within the limits of the resources available to us.

I am also arranging for a copy of this letter and its attachments to be sent to you electronically so that you can distribute it easily within the council and post it on your website should you decide to do this.

Yours sincerely


Tony Redmond

LOCAL AUTHORITY REPORT - Milton Keynes C

For the period ending 31/03/2006

Complaints received by subject area	Education	Highways	Housing (not incl. HB)	Housing Benefit	Local Taxation	Other	Planning	Social Services	Total
01/04/2005 - 31/03/2006	2	6	13	1	3	5	6	6	42
2004 / 2005	6	6	32	4	5	9	7	5	74
2003 / 2004	1	0	17	0	2	6	7	5	38

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

Decisions	Mt reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Premature complaints	Total excl premature	Total
01/04/2005 - 31/03/2006	0	9	0	0	13	7	8	11	37	48
2004 / 2005	0	7	0	0	11	15	11	19	44	63
2003 / 2004	0	6	0	0	18	8	7	10	39	49

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

Average local authority response times 01/04/2005 to 31/03/2006

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
01/04/2005 - 31/03/2006	19	35.0
2004 / 2005	23	31.4
2003 / 2004	20	37.8

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District Councils	53.2	25.3	21.5
Unitary Authorities	41.3	34.8	23.9
Metropolitan Authorities	41.7	30.5	27.8
County Councils	55.9	26.5	17.6
London Boroughs	39.4	39.4	21.2
National Park Authorities	100.0	0.0	0.0

Notes to assist interpretation of the Commission's local authority statistics

1. Complaints received

This information shows the number of complaints received by the LGO, broken down by service area and in total within the periods given. These figures include complaints that are made prematurely to the LGO (see below for more explanation) and that we refer back to the council for consideration. The figures may include some complaints that we have received but where we have not yet contacted the council.

2. Decisions

This information records the number of decisions made by the LGO, broken down by outcome, within the periods given. **This number will not be the same as the number of complaints received**, because some complaints are made in one year and decided in the next. Below we set out a key explaining the outcome categories.

MI reps: where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding maladministration causing injustice.

LS (local settlements): decisions by letter discontinuing our investigation because action has been agreed by the authority and accepted by the Ombudsman as a satisfactory outcome for the complainant.

M reps: where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding maladministration but causing no injustice to the complainant.

NM reps: where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding no maladministration by the council.

No mal: decisions by letter discontinuing an investigation because we have found no, or insufficient, evidence of maladministration.

Omb disc: decisions by letter discontinuing an investigation in which we have exercised the Ombudsman's general discretion not to pursue the complaint. This can be for a variety of reasons, but the most common is that we have found no or insufficient injustice to warrant pursuing the matter further.

Outside jurisdiction: these are cases which were outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction.

Premature complaints: decisions that the complaint is premature. The LGO does not normally consider a complaint unless a council has first had an opportunity to deal with that complaint itself. So if someone complains to the LGO without having taken the matter up with a council, the LGO will usually refer it back to the council as a 'premature complaint' to see if the council can itself resolve the matter.

Total excl premature: all decisions excluding those where we referred the complaint back to the council as 'premature'.

Training from the Local Government Ombudsman

Email: training@lgo.org.uk
Telephone: 01904 380226

Good complaint handling is an essential part of customer care, and local authorities are becoming more and more aware of its benefits in enhancing customer relations, helping the organisation to learn and improve and providing a better public service.

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO), as part of its advice giving role, provides a range of training courses for local authority staff. All of our courses are presented by experienced investigative staff with considerable expertise in complaint handling and knowledge of the theory and practice covered.

More than 150 courses have been delivered since October 2004. Feedback from participants shows that they find it stimulating, challenging and beneficial in their work in dealing with complaints.

Good Complaint Handling (Level 1)

A one-day course for staff who have direct contact with service users, who receive complaints as part of their day to day work and deal with the early stages of the complaints procedure. This course aims to help participants develop their awareness and understanding of complaint handling. It covers areas such as distinguishing complaints from other contacts such as service requests, helping to clarify complaints, managing expectations, settling complaints where appropriate, and improving services.

Effective Complaint Handling (Level 2)

This is our main course and has been extremely well received. It is a one day course for managers, team leaders, departmental and corporate complaints officers. The course is designed to help those dealing with the higher levels of the complaints procedure to develop their skills in complaint investigation and resolution and to avoid the pitfalls that can result in dissatisfaction and referral to the Ombudsman.

The aims of this course are to help participants to: define complaints accurately, identify and use sources of information, make and communicate robust decisions and resolve complaints quickly and appropriately.

Effective Complaint Handling in Social Services (Level 2)

This is a variation on the Effective Complaint Handling Course specifically designed to meet the needs of those dealing with the statutory social services complaints procedures.

'Effective Complaint Handling' courses in other specific subject areas are being researched and developed. For further information contact us.