



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Harborough District Council
for the year ended
31 March 2007**

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) investigates complaints by members of the public who consider that they have been caused injustice through administrative fault by local authorities and certain other bodies. 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 2006/07 - Introduction

The aim of the annual letter is to provide a summary of information on the complaints about Harborough District Council that we have received and try to draw any lessons learned about the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements. These might then be fed back into 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.

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

Volume

We received 12 complaints during the year, a similar number to those received last year.

Character

All 12 complaints were about planning, again a similar pattern to last year when all but three complaints were about planning. The dominance of planning complaints is typical of rural local authorities.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and settlements

We use the term 'local settlement' to describe the outcome of a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, the Council takes, or agrees to take, some action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint and the investigation does not need to be completed. These form a significant proportion of the complaints we determine. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

Three complaints were settled locally. Two were about delay in planning enforcement. In one the Council was satisfied that there was no breach of planning consent but it apologised to the complainants for the delay in confirming this and agreed to review its enforcement procedures. The Council served a noise abatement notice and pursued planning enforcement action on the other complaint and paid £250 towards the complainant's time and trouble.

In a complaint about housing allocations (a case registered the previous year) the Council agreed to pay the complainant £200. The Council also accepted that it needed to review its procedures on housing exchanges to ensure that decisions to refuse Council house exchanges were made in accordance with the law and in a timely manner.

I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

Fifteen complaints were decided during the year. Of these two were outside my jurisdiction, one complaint was premature and, as I mentioned earlier, three were settled locally. The remaining nine were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them, mainly because I considered that the complainant's suffered no injustice from the fault alleged.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The number of premature complaints (one) is low when set against the number of incoming complaints (15). This suggests that complainants can easily access the Council's complaints procedure and I note that details are available on the Council's website.

Training in complaint handling

As part of our role to provide advice in good administrative practice, we offer training courses for all levels of local authority staff in complaints handling and investigation. The feedback from courses that have been delivered over the past two and a half years is very positive.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand and 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 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. If we can provide any further training for you please let Barbara Hedley, Assistant Ombudsman, know.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on seven complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 33 days, an increase on the 26 days it took last year. I am concerned that the number of enquiries made was lower than last year (11) but that the average response time has increased. The Council should take steps to improve its response times here and bring them back to the excellent performance it achieved in the previous two years.

In the last two years I have arranged Regional Seminars in various county areas, inviting Members and Officers of each Council within the locality to meet me to explain the work of the Ombudsman and to explore common concerns. I would like to hold such a seminar in Leicestershire during 2007/08 and would be glad to receive an indication from your Council about whether this would be of interest. We would naturally contact you with further details nearer the time.

LGO developments

I thought it would be helpful to update you on a project we are implementing to improve the first contact that people have with us as part of our customer focus initiative. We are developing a new Access and Advice Service that will provide a gateway to our services for all complainants and enquirers. It will be mainly telephone-based but will also deal with email, text and letter correspondence. As the project progresses we will keep you informed about developments and expected timescales.

Changes brought about by the Local Government Bill are also expected to impact on the way we work and again we will keep you informed as relevant.

We use the term 'local settlement' to describe the outcome of a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, the Council takes, or agrees to take, some action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint and the investigation does not need to be completed. These form a significant proportion of the complaints we determine. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

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 2007

Enc: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics
Details of training courses

Complaints received by subject area	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	0	0	12	12
2005 / 2006	0	2	1	11	14
2004 / 2005	1	0	0	8	9

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
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	3	0	0	6	3	2	1	14	15
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	7	3	0	2	10	12
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	4	2	0	1	7	8

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
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	7	32.6
2005 / 2006	11	26.1
2004 / 2005	7	24.7

Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	>= 36 days %
District Councils	48.9	23.4	27.7
Unitary Authorities	30.4	37.0	32.6
Metropolitan Authorities	38.9	41.7	19.4
County Councils	47.1	32.3	20.6
London Boroughs	39.4	33.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	66.7	33.3	0.0