



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter to Wirral Metropolitan Borough 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

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about your authority. Where possible, we comment on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements to 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.

As you are a local Social Services authority I want to take this opportunity to draw your attention to an issue of significant public interest. In the last two years I have issued reports following complaints from people living in Blackpool, Liverpool and Sheffield about failings in home care services provided under contract.

In each case a vulnerable person was placed at significant risk as a result of carers failing to visit, calling late and failing to provide the specified care. Tragically, in one case the actions of a carer resulted in a death. Complaints had been made to all three Councils but no effective action had been taken. Although the services were provided under contract, it seems clear that similar problems could occur even if the carers are directly employed. I urge you to ensure that senior staff responsible for care services to adults are aware of the issues raised by these reports (which can be found on our web-site) and consider whether action needs to be taken by your Council. The 2006 report of the Commission for Social Care Inspection 'Time to Care? An Overview of Home Care Services for Older People in England' provides very useful contextual information.

Complaints received

Volume & Character

It will seem, superficially, as if the number of complaints received against the Council by my office has fallen dramatically from the previous year – ie from 128 to 77. This is because last year's figures were inflated by a major multiple complaint about housing benefit. The level of complaints is fairly static and has remained so over the last four years. The effect of the multiple complaint is by the fall this year in complaints about housing benefit – from 53 to two. The level and distribution of complaints gives me no particular cause for comment or concern.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

A 'local settlement' is a complaint that is resolved by the Council taking, or agreeing to take, action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint so that the investigation can be discontinued. In 2006/07 27.7% of complaints dealt with by the three Local Government Ombudsmen (excluding premature and those outside jurisdiction) were resolved by local settlement. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

I did not issue any reports against the Council during the year. Eight complaints were resolved by local settlement.

Other findings

95 complaints were decided by my staff. Of those, 17 were premature – ie the Council had not had an opportunity to investigate and respond to the complainant. Such complaints are referred to the Council with a request to deal with them through the Council's own complaints procedure. Seven complaints were outside of my jurisdiction. In 41 cases my Investigators exercised their discretion not to pursue the complaints. No evidence of maladministration was found in 22 cases.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I am concerned that the way the Council responds to complaints through its own procedures or directly to my office, is not generally satisfactory. Last year I highlighted significant issues around the recruitment of panel members to sit on appeal panels dealing with certain complaints about social services through a statutory procedure. Problems remain and need to be resolved quickly and effectively.

There is a problem of delay in the overall time taken by the Council to respond to enquiries. The average of nearly 112 days is wholly unacceptable from any viewpoint. The multiple complaint about housing benefit has a significant effect on the average (discounting that, the average time is around 43 days – better but still far from satisfactory). But the fact remains that responses to that multiple took 187 days to be made. Even allowing for real problems within that batch of complaints, this is appalling! Equally appalling are individual cases elsewhere that took 50 days or more (six, not counting the multiple complaint).

We ask for responses to complaints about school admissions to be made in the much shorter time of 14 days – such cases meriting strong priority so that parents know where they stand. One response took 70 days and the average for four cases was over 32 days, with none meeting the target.

These are issues I raised in last year's Annual Letter. The Assistant Ombudsman who led the team that deals with Wirral did meet with one of the Council's officers to discuss the problems but clearly, much remains to be done. Training on complaints handling delivered in March to some of the Council's staff by dedicated training staff from this office will help. I think it would be useful to meet personally with senior representatives of the Council to discuss ways of avoiding this occurring again 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. The feedback from councils that have taken up the training is 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 have also successfully piloted a course on reviewing complaints for social services 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

You may be interested in the development of our initiative to improve the first contact that people have with us. A new Access and Advice Service will provide a gateway to our services for all complainants and enquirers. It will encourage telephone contact but will also deal with email, text and letter correspondence. We will let you have further details about how it will operate and the expected timescales and we will discuss with you the implications for your Council.

I hope you have received our latest special report about telecommunication masts. It draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for masts which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the chances of maladministration occurring.

In July we will be publishing a special report about the difficulties that can be encountered with complaints when local authorities deliver services or discharge their functions through partnerships. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* provides advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

Conclusions and general observations

I welcome this opportunity to comment on our experience of complaints about the Council over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

Anne Seex
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June 2007

Enc: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

Complaints received by subject area	Adult care services	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Social Services - other	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	8	2	8	10	5	10	17	3	0	14	77
2005 / 2006	12	54	9	15	6	10	13	1	0	8	128
2004 / 2005	9	3	2	10	15	14	19	0	1	7	80

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	8	0	0	22	41	7	17	78	95
2005 / 2006	0	11	0	0	24	19	5	41	59	100
2004 / 2005	1	9	0	0	21	18	9	25	58	83

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	52	111.9
2005 / 2006	47	36.6
2004 / 2005	32	41.3

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