



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Cannock Chase 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 Cannock Chase 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 24 complaints during the year. Three complaints were about the same planning application but still this is a substantial increase on the 13 received in the previous year. However, we expect variation in the figures from year to year, and I see no special significance in the rise.

Character

Fourteen complaints were received about planning, three about housing and two about transport and highways. Of the five complaints in the "other" category, two were about land, one about environmental health, one about anti-social behaviour and one about cemeteries. We did not receive any complaints about local taxation or benefits. This is the second year running that no complaints about benefits were received and indicates good complaint handling and resolution in this service area.

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.

In this complaint, about delays and failings in carrying out repairs to the complainant's home, the Council helpfully visited the property with my investigator to assess the situation. During this meeting agreement was reached about what further work needed to be done which included the replacement of the front and back doors. The Council also paid the complainant £100 as compensation for delay in dealing with an issue relating to the back garden. I am grateful for the Council's assistance in settling this complaint.

I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

Twenty-four complaints were decided during the year. Of these one was outside my jurisdiction, seven complaints were premature and, as I mentioned earlier, one was settled locally. The remaining 15 were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The number of premature complaints (seven) received this year is slightly higher than the number received last year (four). While these figures are not statistically significant the increased number may suggest that the Council's complaints process may not be sufficiently visible to customers or that staff, when dealing with requests for assistance, do not signpost the complaints process for customers who remain unhappy with what the Council has done.

Greater visibility here will no doubt help the Council achieve early resolution of citizens' grievances. I say this because, of the seven complaints referred back to you as premature last year, none was resubmitted to me. This is commendable, and strongly suggests that when complaints do reach the appropriate people in the organisation they work hard to resolve them.

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.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on eight complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 48 days, an unacceptable increase on the 34 days it took last year. I have no doubt that the way my enquiries are dealt with centrally by the Council could be improved. The Council should improve its response times here, particularly given the relatively low number of enquiries I made of the Council. I look forward to receiving your proposal for achieving the Commission's target of receiving the Council's responses 28 days after enquiries.

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 have just issued a special report that draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for phone masts considered under the prior approval system, which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the problems that can occur.

A further special report will be published in July focusing on the difficulties that can be encountered when complaints are received by local authorities about services delivered through a partnership. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* sets out our advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by adopting good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

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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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	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	3	5	14	0	2	24
2005 / 2006	0	4	6	2	1	0	13
2004 / 2005	3	5	3	9	0	1	21

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	1	0	0	3	12	1	7	17	24
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	12	4	1	4	18	22
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	7	0	0	6	8	14

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	8	47.9
2005 / 2006	4	33.8
2004 / 2005	8	33.5

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