



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Castle Morpeth 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.

Complaints received

Volume

Last year there were 19 complaints against the Council, a marginal increase upon the previous year when there had been 17 complaints, though I note that in the year before that there had been 21 complaints.

Character

The largest single category of complaints was those against planning and building control services where the number rose slightly from 5 to 7 complaints. The level of complaints against housing services generally remained constant at 5, while there was an increase of 2 complaints against transport and highways services.

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.

No reports were published against the Council last year, but two complaints were locally settled by the Council, one with a payment of £500 to compensate the complainant for the Council's failure to notify the complainant of a planning application for the erection of a dormer window extension, and also failing to consider properly the impact of the development upon the amenity of the neighbour from overlooking.

I was also pleased to note that following my investigation of some planning matters previously, the Council has prepared a guide for its (at the time) largely inexperienced planning officer team which is based upon the Council's experience of planning complaints. This is a useful guide to staff, and I commend the Council for its preparation. It provides a good example of learning from contact with my office and seeking to reduce the number of complaints which are made to the Council and upheld by myself.

Other findings

Last year I took decisions upon 17 complaints, a similar number to the previous year, though 7 of these were premature complaints in the sense that the Council had not yet had a proper opportunity to consider and respond to those complaints as is required by law.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I was also pleased to note that the Council's own website adequately outlines its own complaints procedure and provides linkage directly across to the Commission's website, where details of how to complain to my office are provided, in the event that a complainant is not satisfied by the response received from the Council.

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 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.

I am pleased to note that Castle Morpeth, like other Northumberland councils, is considering the possibility of a training course run for the collective benefit of Northumberland councils, and I hope that this may come to fruition during the coming year.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Last year the Council responded within an average time of 26.1 calendar days upon the eight complaints where enquiries were made. While this was a little longer than during the previous year when the council had responded within an average time of 23.8 calendar days upon five complaints, it is still within the Commission's new target of 28 calendar days and the Council is to be congratulated for its continued good performance.

During the year you welcomed the Assistant Ombudsman who now leads the team of investigators dealing with complaints against your Council. This visit was a useful opportunity to explain changes within the Commission's structure, procedures and objectives; discuss complaints; consider training and to meet the staff who deal with our enquiries. I hope that the relationship will continue to be constructive.

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 discuss with you the implications for the Council.

I hope you have received our latest special report about telecommunications 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	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	5	4	7	0	2	19
2005 / 2006	0	5	6	5	1	0	17
2004 / 2005	1	4	6	8	2	0	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	2	0	0	4	3	1	7	10	17
2005 / 2006	0	6	0	0	2	2	1	5	11	16
2004 / 2005	0	2	0	0	7	3	0	8	12	20

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	26.1
2005 / 2006	5	23.8
2004 / 2005	8	23.3

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