



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter to Chester City 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 & Character

The number of complaints received fell slightly from 24 to 23. This is of no particular significance. Whilst the number of complaints about planning is at a relatively high level (15) – ie over 50% - I suspect that the cause of this stems more from the nature of the Council's area than it does from any general shortcomings. Nor does the general distribution of complaints within subject areas give me any cause for comment.

Decisions on complaints

18 complaints were decided by my office in the year. Of those, four were premature – ie the Council had not itself been given a fair opportunity to investigate and respond to the complainant. Four were outside of my jurisdiction. Otherwise, the decided cases resulted in no criticisms or local settlements, something that reflects well on the Council.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I have no reason to be concerned about the way the Council deals with complaints from members of the public under its own complaints procedures.

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.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

There has been a significant increase in the time it now takes the Council to respond to enquiries about complaints. Last year it took on average a very commendable 21 days. That has slipped to approaching 40 days and is unacceptable. One complaint took over 50 days and I note that four complaints about planning took on average over 43 days. I ask the Council to look carefully into the causes of this decline and to let me know what action it intends to put things right.

Working relations between our offices remain good.

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
Local Government Ombudsman
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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	Children and family services	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	1	0	5	15	1	1	23
2005 / 2006	1	0	1	9	11	0	2	24
2004 / 2005	0	0	2	7	18	0	4	31

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	0	0	0	9	1	4	4	14	18
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	7	4	2	9	16	25
2004 / 2005	1	5	0	0	6	8	4	5	24	29

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	39.3
2005 / 2006	8	21.0
2004 / 2005	15	30.5

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