



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter Crawley 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

The aim of the annual letter is to provide a summary of information on the complaints about your authority 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

In my letter to you last year I noted that there had been a fall from 28 to 22 in the number of complaints received against your Council. This year there has been a slight increase to 26.

As in the preceding two years, the highest number of complaints was about housing. Within this category, five complaints were about housing repairs (two of which were from the same person). The rest covered allocations, managing tenancies, homelessness and housing sales/leaseholds.

We received six complaints about planning applications. Nine other complaints were about a variety of subjects: three about anti-social behaviour, two about benefits and one about council tax.

Decisions on complaints

During the year I decided 33 complaints against your Council. Fourteen were not pursued because there was insufficient evidence of administrative fault and a further eight were closed on my discretion, for a variety of reasons. Two were not within my jurisdiction, six were considered to be premature and were sent back to be dealt with through your own complaints procedure.

Reports and local 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.

This year I did not issue a formal report against the Council. However, three complaints were decided as local settlements.

In one case the Council delayed for 20 months before installing a shower as recommended by an Occupational Therapist. The Council promptly installed the shower once we made enquiries and also agreed to pay compensation of £1,000 to the complainant.

In the other two cases the Council took action to resolve the complaints when we made enquiries: in one case by carrying out a repair and, in the other, reinstating appeal rights when the complainant's housing register application was cancelled.

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Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

Of the 33 complaints decided by my office during 2006/2007, 6 were referred back to the Council for consideration through its own complaints procedure.

Three complaints received by my office during the year had previously been sent back to the Council to deal with through its complaints procedure, but were then resubmitted to us by the complainants. I found no maladministration in these resubmitted complaints.

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. We delivered some training to your Council in early 2005.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand. We offer 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 slight improvement in the times taken by the Council to respond to our initial enquiries about complaints. The average time is now just over 19 days which is significantly below our target response time of 28 days. It is all the more creditable when you take into account that we made written enquiries on 14 complaints during the year, compared with just eight in 2005/06.

I was pleased that an officer from the Council attended our Link Officer seminar in November.

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 that 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. In terms of complaints to my office the picture is an encouraging one: the number of complaints received has decreased for the second year running and your response times have improved considerably. I have referred above to some remaining areas of concern in the area of complaints handling and I look forward to receiving your further comments.

I should like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your cooperation and help in dealing with complaints this year.

Tony Redmond
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	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	12	5	6	1	0	26
2005 / 2006	1	10	2	7	2	0	22
2004 / 2005	4	12	9	0	2	1	28

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	14	8	2	6	27	33
2005 / 2006	0	5	0	0	4	1	0	7	10	17
2004 / 2005	0	3	0	0	8	4	3	13	18	31

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	14	19.4
2005 / 2006	8	20.3
2004 / 2005	7	24.1

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