



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Dover District 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 Dover District 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

I received 23 complaints about your council last year, the same as in the previous year. The distribution of complaints was broadly similar although the number of planning complaints fell. I received no complaints about benefits. The numbers are in any event small and do not in my view indicate anything of significance in terms of service delivery.

Decisions on complaints

During the year we made decisions on 23 complaints against your authority.

We found no maladministration in three complaints and we exercised discretion to close a further nine without requiring any action by the Council. Four were outside my jurisdiction.

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.

I issued no reports on complaints against your authority last year. I settled just one complaint. This concerned the fact that the Council had not suspended court proceedings against the complainant even though he had offered to pay outstanding Council tax. The Council acknowledged its error and apologised. It also amended its guidance to staff to ensure that any payments made "under protest" should still be allocated to accounts to avoid any unnecessary court action.

Other findings

I considered one complaint about anti-social behaviour. While I did not pursue the complaint I asked the Council to discuss arrangements with its partner agencies to ensure that information is passed promptly between those agencies. I would welcome your comments on the outcome of any such discussions.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

My office referred six 'premature complaints' to your authority for consideration, as we did not think you had had sufficient opportunity to deal with them through your own procedures. At 26% of all decisions this is close to the national average. This and the continuing low level of settlements indicates that the Council's complaints system remains effective.

I also note with interest that the Council is the lead authority for the National Leaflet Project for Housing and Council Tax Benefit, designed to provide an accessible source of information on benefits.

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 now offer these courses specifically for social services staff. We 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 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 understand that the Council's Link Officer has already expressed an interest in such training and we would be pleased to discuss how best our available courses might meet the Council's needs.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

I am pleased to note that the average response time to my enquiries was just 17.1 days, a substantial improvement on the previous year and well within the target of 28 days. The Council has also been responsive where information has been requested without formal enquires being made.

The liaison between our offices remains effective and constructive, and I am grateful to the Council for its continuing efforts in this regard.

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.

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.

Tony Redmond
Local Government Ombudsman
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Millbank
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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	5	6	6	4	2	23
2005 / 2006	1	5	1	14	1	1	23
2004 / 2005	1	9	5	4	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	1	0	0	3	9	4	6	17	23
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	4	5	3	6	12	18
2004 / 2005	0	2	0	0	8	1	2	10	13	23

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	7	17.1
2005 / 2006	3	28.7
2004 / 2005	5	37.0

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