



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter to Easington 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

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 against the Council received by my office has risen to 40. I note that, as with last year, the number about housing issues remains prominent at 19 but have no cause to raise any specific issues about this.

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.

I have not issued any reports against the Council during the year. Seven complaints were subject to some form of settlement. This is also a relatively high percentage of those complaints subject to investigation and potentially indicative of some problems within the Council's own procedures.

Other findings

Thirty three complaints were decided by my staff during the year. Of these 17 were premature – ie where the Council had not itself first had a fair opportunity to investigate and respond to a complaint. That reflects the position last year and is a fairly high percentage of the total and could indicate some problems in bringing the Council's own complaints procedure to the notice both of citizens and staff. I ask the Council to look into that possibility. One complaint was outside of my jurisdiction.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

Please see my comments above.

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

The seven settlements mentioned above do not merit individual attention in this letter but it is worth recording a high number of positive comments from staff here as to how the Council dealt with them and the complaints.

In August, the Assistant Ombudsman who then led the team that deals (among others) with Easington came to your offices to meet staff who are involved directly with us. He recorded a very positive and helpful meeting. That confirms the generally excellent working relationships between our two offices.

The only downside is the time taken by the Council to respond to our enquiries. I noted in last year's letter that the Council was too slow and sadly things have got worse despite my asking the Council to improve. Fifteen enquiries took on average nearly 43 days to be responded to against a deadline of 28 days. This must improve in the coming year and I would like the Council to tell me how it proposes to tackle this problem.

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.

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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	0	19	12	6	2	1	40
2005 / 2006	0	15	13	3	4	1	36
2004 / 2005	2	10	13	8	0	3	36

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	7	0	0	3	5	1	17	16	33
2005 / 2006	0	12	0	0	8	1	2	12	23	35
2004 / 2005	1	4	0	0	9	8	6	8	28	36

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	15	42.6
2005 / 2006	21	41.1
2004 / 2005	15	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