



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

## **The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter**

# **Eastbourne 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**

We received 25 complaints against the Council during the year which is the same figure as in the previous year. The number of complaints about benefits fell from nine last year to five and the number of planning complaints increased from five to eight. In view of the relatively small number of complaints I do not think there is any significant trend that can be identified from these figures.

## **Decisions on complaints**

During the year we decided 29 complaints, eight of which had been received in the previous year.

## ***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.

I issued no reports against the Council during this year. However, three complaints resulted in local settlements with a total of £250 compensation paid by the Council. Of this total, £200 related to a complaint where the Council had delayed making direct payment of housing benefit.

The other local settlements related to housing benefit and council tax recovery action.

## ***Other findings***

Five complaints were about matters outside our jurisdiction and 13 complaints resulted in findings of no or insufficient evidence of maladministration.

We investigated four related complaints and, although we did not uphold them, the Council told my investigator that it was reviewing its procedures for dealing with anti-social behaviour. I shall be grateful if you will let me know whether the review has been completed and supply me with a copy of the new procedures.

## **Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints**

During the year we referred just one complaint back to the Council for consideration through its own complaints procedure.

/...

### **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. I am pleased that we were able to provide training in good complaint handling to 14 of the Council's officers January 2007. I hope that they found the event worthwhile.

I wanted to let you know that the range of courses is expanding in response to demand and I have enclosed some information on all the courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings.

### **Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman**

The target time for responses to our enquiries is 28 days. I note the average time for your responses to our enquiries was 23.9 days, a substantial improvement on the previous year's figure (30.6 days). This is well within the target time.

My investigators have told me that your officers have generally been helpful and quick to respond to complaints and that there appears to be strong support from senior management within the Council to encourage the swift and fair resolution of complaints.

### **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.

**Tony Redmond**  
**Local Government Ombudsman**  
**10<sup>th</sup> Floor**  
**Millbank Tower**  
**Millbank**  
**London**  
**SW1P 4QP**

**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	5	2	7	8	3	0	25
2005 / 2006	9	2	5	5	1	3	25
2004 / 2005	1	3	4	4	2	0	14

**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	13	7	5	1	28	29
2005 / 2006	0	2	0	0	8	2	5	5	17	22
2004 / 2005	0	2	0	0	4	0	2	5	8	13

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	17	23.9
2005 / 2006	9	30.6
2004 / 2005	4	19.8

**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