



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter

Gloucester 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

The aim of the annual letter is to provide a summary of information on the complaints about Gloucester City 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

Volume

We received 14 complaints during the year, a significant reduction on the 30 received in the previous year. The numbers have varied considerably over the years and I have detected no particular reason for the fall.

Character

Three complaints were about housing, three about planning and building control, two about benefits and one about public finance. Of the five complaints in the "other" category, two were about cemeteries and crematoria, one was about anti-social behaviour, one was about environmental health and one was about leisure and culture.

Decisions on complaints

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.

Four complaints were settled locally. In one complaint, about planning and building control, the Council agreed to pay £500 compensation for the delay in providing correct advice about whether a loft conversion was permitted development. In a complaint about cemeteries and crematoria, the Council agreed to pay £300 compensation for the distress caused by an error which led to a family grave not being dug to the required depth for an additional interment and to take steps to establish whether an additional interment could take place. In a complaint about housing allocations the Council paid £250 compensation for disappointment caused by making a decision, based on out of date information, not to offer a particular property to the complainant and in one complaint the Council agreed to pay £150 compensation for its delay in carrying out housing repairs.

The total compensation paid was £1200. I am grateful to the Council for its assistance in settling these complaints.

I did not issue any reports against your Council in the year 2006-07.

Other findings

Eighteen complaints were decided during the year. Of these, four were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. One complaint was premature, and, as I mentioned earlier, four were settled locally. Of the remaining nine, five were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen and in a further four cases I exercised my discretion not to pursue them.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The number of premature complaints (one) shows a significant decrease on the number received last year (10) and is below the national average for councils as a whole. This would suggest that the Council publicises and operates its complaints procedure effectively.

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. 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

We made enquiries on 10 complaints this year and the average time for responding was 41.1 days, an increase on the 33.8 days the Council took last year. This does not compare well with our target time of 28 days. Responses from Housing are much improved, taking an average of 31 days compared with 57.5 days last year, but responses for complaints in other categories are taking between 41 and 50 days. The Council must now take steps to identify the cause of the problem and ensure that it replies more promptly so that my staff can provide complainants with a timely decision on their complaints.

No one from the Council has attended the annual link officer seminar recently and you may wish to consider sending someone to the seminar to be held later in November. If so, please let Reynold Stephen the Assistant Ombudsman, know the details of the Link Officer and he will arrange for an invitation to be sent.

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 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.

J R White
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	3	5	3	1	0	14
2005 / 2006	3	8	9	9	0	1	30
2004 / 2005	2	8	8	2	2	2	24

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	4	0	0	5	4	4	1	17	18
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	10	4	2	10	19	29
2004 / 2005	0	6	0	0	11	0	2	4	19	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	10	41.1
2005 / 2006	13	33.8
2004 / 2005	13	47.2

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