



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

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

I received 16 complaints against your Council in the year, the same number as in the previous year. There was a slight increase in the number of complaints about housing but, given the low number of complaints overall, I do not consider these figures indicate any particular problems in service delivery.

## **Decisions on complaints**

I made decisions on 17 complaints this year. Of these six were 'premature complaints' which I did not think your Council had had sufficient opportunity to deal with through its own complaints procedure. This is a slight increase on previous years but the number of premature complaints remains low.

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

## **Reports and local settlements**

When we complete an investigation we must issue a report. There is a significant proportion of investigations that do not reach that stage. This is because we settle the complaint during the course of our investigation. We call these decisions 'local settlements'. I issued no reports against your Council last year. We agreed four local settlements.

One concerned the Council's delay in upholding the complainant's representations against a penalty charge notice (a parking ticket). The complainant had spent money in pursuing his representations pending the successful outcome and the Council had initially refused to compensate him. My Investigator asked the Council to pay the complainant £10. I am pleased that the Council voluntarily increased this to £25. The Council also speeded up its consideration of representations and tailored its responses to match individual cases.

A second complaint concerned the Council's failure to pick up on a report of damp on the complainant's transfer request form in 2002. The complainant's home had neither gas central heating nor adequate ventilation and suffered from persistent damp and mould. To remedy the complaint, the Council increased the complainant's priority for a transfer; it installed a ventilation system and treated mould in the property and agreed to pay £500 in compensation.

A third complaint concerned the Council's failure to maintain an area in a public park immediately around a complainant's property as previously agreed. The complainant could not access parts of his property for maintenance purposes and his enjoyment of his property was impaired. The Council's Complaints Officer made two site visits with officers from the relevant service area to agree the works that were needed, which were then carried out.

The last complaint concerned the Council's failure to contact the complainant before it carried out works to the roof of his tenanted house which officers judged to be in need of repair. The complainant had no opportunity to object to what the Council was doing. The Council subsequently invoiced him for the work. It was unlikely the outcome would have been different if the complainant had been contacted at the outset. Nevertheless the Council acknowledged fault and readily agreed to pay £400 towards the cost of the works and for the time and trouble the complainant was put to.

In all four of these cases I was pleased to note that officers from all of the service areas concerned were proactive and helpful in settling matters.

### **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 am aware that complaints staff from your Council will be attending one of our Effective Complaint Handling Courses during the 2007/2008 year. Nevertheless 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**

On the few occasions my investigators have needed to make enquires of the Council, officers have taken an average of 24.4 days to respond. This is well within my 28 calendar day target, and is consistent with the times taken in the two preceding years. The responses are detailed and helpful.

### **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**  
**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	1	5	1	6	1	2	16
2005 / 2006	1	2	6	6	1	0	16
2004 / 2005	3	2	1	7	1	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	4	0	0	3	3	1	6	11	17
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	4	1	3	3	11	14
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	8	2	1	3	12	15

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	8	24.4
2005 / 2006	3	24.0
2004 / 2005	8	24.9

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