



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Kingston upon Hull 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

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.

As you are a local Social Services authority I want to take this opportunity to draw your attention to an issue of significant public interest. In the last two years I have issued reports following complaints from people living in Blackpool, Liverpool and Sheffield about failings in home care services provided under contract.

In each case a vulnerable person was placed at significant risk as a result of carers failing to visit, calling late and failing to provide the specified care. Tragically, in one case the actions of a carer resulted in a death. Complaints had been made to all three Councils but no effective action had been taken. Although the services were provided under contract, it seems clear that similar problems could occur even if the carers are directly employed. I urge you to ensure that senior staff responsible for care services to adults are aware of the issues raised by these reports (which can be found on our web-site) and consider whether action needs to be taken by your Council. The 2006 report of the Commission for Social Care Inspection 'Time to Care? An Overview of Home Care Services for Older People in England' provides very useful contextual information.

Complaints received

We received 81 complaints about your Council during 2006/07, continuing the downward trend of the previous two years. Looking at the types of complaint received, there were increases in other and planning and building control and reductions in adult care services, housing, public finance and transport and highways complaints. These changes are within the normal fluctuations in complaints numbers and types.

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.

We did not issue any reports about your Council during 2006/07. There were eleven local settlements, which formed 42.3% of all the substantive decisions made (excluding premature complaints and those outside my jurisdiction), compared to the national figure of 27.7%. The local settlements resulted in payments of £3,586 as well as a review of policy and procedures on identifying start dates for those being awarded Special Priority housing allocations, a review of how job tickets for special waste collections are filled in to ensure only specified items are taken and agreement to sell land to a complainant. Two complaints involved problems with insurance claims.

My last Annual Letter drew attention to the relatively high proportion of housing complaints resulting in local settlements. There has been no repeat of that pattern this year.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

Your Council took an average of 28.4 days to respond to initial enquiries from my office, very close to the target of 28 days. This is an improvement on last year and to be welcomed, as it enables the Ombudsman to provide a good quality service to complainants.

We made 69 decisions during 2006/07, of which 36 (52.2%) were premature, that is the Council had not had a reasonable opportunity to respond to the complaint. Nine of the complaints decided during the year (13%) were resubmitted premature complaints, where the complainant was dissatisfied with the Council's response. This is close to the national figure of 10%. Of these, five (55.6%) led to a local settlement, above the national figure of 21.5%. I am aware that the Council has been comprehensively reviewing how it deals with its customers and handles complaints and this may help in reducing the number of premature complaints the Ombudsman receives and the number of resubmitted premature complaints the Council has considered which result in a local settlement

My investigators report that your staff are generally helpful and informative in how they deal with complaints. After the problems identified with the Council's complaints procedures last year, particularly delay in responding, we have come across fewer issues this year. A problem with urgent internal post not being directed appropriately and leading to delays was identified and I hope that the action the Council has taken will prevent the situation recurring. I would also draw to your attention one complaint which was poorly handled by the Council. A report that a Council vehicle was being driven dangerously was not responded to when the complainant reported it to the Council, nor when my office forwarded the complaint to the Council as premature. It is important that all complaints receive a response, particularly when they are referred by my office, if local people are to have faith in the Council's complaints procedures.

Following last year's Annual Letter, I am pleased that there is now an easily found direct link to the Commission's website.

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. Your Council again took advantage of the training we offer on Good Complaints Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaints Handling (investigation and resolution) for social services staff during 2006/07. Further training has been arranged for 2007/08.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

My Assistant Ombudsman was pleased to attend a meeting of the Standards Committee to present last year's Annual Letter. This was also an opportunity to talk generally about the importance of complaints within the Council's broader review of its how it deals with its customers.

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 we will discuss with you the implications for your Council.

I hope you have received our latest special report about telecommunication 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.

Anne Seex
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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	Adult care services	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Social Services - other	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	6	6	6	22	24	8	4	0	3	81
2005 / 2006	5	4	4	6	31	19	2	8	1	8	88
2004 / 2005	6	2	2	9	16	30	7	1	1	17	91

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	11	0	0	8	7	7	36	33	69
2005 / 2006	0	20	0	0	26	8	6	39	60	99
2004 / 2005	0	10	0	0	24	8	9	35	51	86

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	18	28.4
2005 / 2006	40	30.9
2004 / 2005	32	26.5

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