



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

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

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**

There was a further reduction in complaints against the Council during 2006/07. We received 11 complaints, down from 15 and 20 in the previous two years. The single largest category of complaint was planning.

## **Decisions on complaints**

### ***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.

As in previous years, we issued no reports against your Council. There was just one local settlement when the Council agreed to pay £50 compensation in recognition of its delay in taking planning enforcement action. The Council also agreed to review its enforcement policy relating to the discharge of planning conditions prior to commencement of works. I should welcome an update on the progress of that review.

### ***Other findings***

Two complaints fell outside of my jurisdiction and a further ten were not pursued because of insufficient evidence of injustice or maladministration.

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

During the year we referred three complaints back to the Council to be dealt with under its complaints procedure.

One of the complaints received this year had previously been referred back to the Council, but I did not uphold it.

During the year the Council has introduced some changes to its complaints procedure and has issued new guidance for its staff. I should be interested to hear how these changes have been received and whether the Council can identify any consequential improvements in the complaints service.

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### **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 for 14 of the Council's officers in October 2006. Some participants felt that the course might usefully be offered to front-line staff. We are constantly developing this area of our work and 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 Council responds promptly to our formal written enquiries, taking an average of 25 days during 2006/07 (though we made such enquiries on just two cases), compared with over 28 days in the previous year.

The Deputy Ombudsman was pleased to visit the Council in August 2006, when he attended a Corporate Management Team meeting and talked about, among other things, last year's annual letter.

### **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.

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## **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)

<b>Complaints received by subject area</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Transport and highways</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	2	1	2	4	1	1	<b>11</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	1	1	2	11	0	0	<b>15</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	0	4	5	9	2	0	<b>20</b>

**Note:** these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

<b>Decisions</b>	<b>MI reps</b>	<b>LS</b>	<b>M reps</b>	<b>NM reps</b>	<b>No mal</b>	<b>Omb disc</b>	<b>Outside jurisdiction</b>	<b>Premature complaints</b>	<b>Total excl premature</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	0	1	0	0	5	5	2	3	13	<b>16</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	1	0	0	7	3	2	3	13	<b>16</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	0	1	0	0	9	1	4	4	15	<b>19</b>

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

<b>Response times</b>	<b>FIRST ENQUIRIES</b>	
	<b>No. of First Enquiries</b>	<b>Avg no. of days to respond</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	2	25.0
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	10	28.6
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	9	23.6

**Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007**

<b>Types of authority</b>	<b>&lt;= 28 days %</b>	<b>29 - 35 days %</b>	<b>&gt;= 36 days %</b>
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