



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
Lichfield 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 Lichfield District 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 16 complaints during the year, a small increase on 2005/06, but we expect to see these variations year on year.

### ***Character***

Nine complaints were received about transport and highways and largely concern disputes about parking tickets. Two complaints were about benefits and one about housing. Of the two complaints in the 'other' category, one was about environmental health and one about payments made to a former council employee. There was a considerable fall in the number of complaints about planning and building control from eight in the previous year to just two. No complaints were received about public finance, in contrast to previous years.

## **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.

One complaint was settled locally. In this complaint I took the view that the Council had not given enough consideration to the effect of a development on a neighbouring house. Balconies were positioned on the new development causing a considerable degree of overlooking into the complainant's property. The Council arranged meetings with the developer and the complainant resulting in improved landscaping. The complainant was also paid compensation of £1,000 for his loss of amenity. I am grateful for your Council's assistance in settling this complaint.

I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

### ***Other findings***

Eighteen complaints were decided during the year. Of these, two were outside my jurisdiction and so I was unable to consider them. Only two complaints were premature and, as I mentioned earlier, one was settled locally. The remaining 13 were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen.

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

The number of premature complaints (two) is low suggesting that the Council's complaints process is sufficiently visible to customers and that staff, when dealing with requests for assistance, signpost the complaints process for those who remain unhappy with what the Council has done.

## **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 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 seven complaints this year, the same number as last year and I am pleased to see that the average time for responding has reduced to 35 days from 46 days in the previous year. But this remains well outside our target time of 28 days. The Council should now put in place measures to match its performance of two years ago.

I was pleased to welcome your link officer to the seminar I held in Coventry in November. I hope he found the seminar useful.

## **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**  
**The Oaks No 2**  
**Westwood Way**  
**Westwood Business Park**  
**Coventry CV4 8JB**

**June 2007**

Enc: Statistical data  
Note on interpretation of statistics  
Details of training courses

<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	2	0	9	<b>16</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	1	2	8	1	1	<b>13</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	0	0	0	3	4	2	<b>9</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	13	0	2	2	16	<b>18</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	2	0	0	5	1	1	3	9	<b>12</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	0	1	0	0	6	2	1	3	10	<b>13</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>	7	34.7
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	7	46.1
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	4	28.5

**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