



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Norfolk County 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 Norfolk County 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 46 complaints during the year. Over the last three years there has been a steady reduction in the volume of complaints I have received against your Council. Last year we received 51 complaints and 62 in the previous year.

Character

The number of complaints about education has dropped from 16 to 11 and I am aware that this is largely due to the significant efforts the Council has made to improve its service to children with special educational needs.

The number of complaints received about adult services has remained the same (nine). Fewer complaints about children and family services have been received this year (three) compared to six in 2005-2006 and ten in 2004-2005.

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 this year and a total of £1250 was paid in remedies.

In a complaint about adult care services, the Council failed to explain the charging system for a housing with care scheme to the complainant whose care needs were minimal but who had been offered a tenancy because there were vacancies in the scheme. The Council recognised that the complainant had been misled and agreed to accept a reduced care fee until such time as re-assessment of the complainant's needs demonstrates that she has need for the high level of care and support available within the scheme. The Council also made a payment totalling £750 for distress and anxiety and for the time and trouble in pursuing the complaint.

In a complaint about special educational needs, the Council accepted that it had failed to chase medical advice for an assessment of special educational need for some nine months causing anxiety and distress to the complainant. Unfortunately there was confusion during the complaint process about which stage the complaint had reached and who should reply, which contributed to delay. By the time of my decision on the complaint, the Council had already introduced new processes and

systems to ensure that cases are properly tracked and had provided emergency funding for learning support within the school. It also agreed to make a payment of £500 to remedy the complainant's injustice.

I am grateful to the Council for its help in providing appropriate redress in these cases.

I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

Forty-two complaints were decided during the year. Of these ten were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Nine complaints were premature and, as I mentioned earlier, four were settled locally. The remaining 19 were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The number of premature complaints (nine) is relatively low when set against the number of incoming complaints (46). This suggests 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.

Your Council's website is accessible and enables members of the public to make a complaint or pay a compliment quickly and easily. It might be helpful if a link to social care complaints procedures was provided on the main compliments and complaints page. It is also helpful if pages are reviewed regularly so that contact names and numbers are up to date.

Only three of the nine complaints referred back to you as premature, were resubmitted to me. This is commendable, and strongly suggests that when complaints reach the Council, it works hard to resolve them. In two cases I discontinued the investigation and in the third complaint about adult social care services the Council agreed to settle the complaint as described above.

Your officers will readily seek advice from my office about administrative procedures and appropriate remedies when it realises that something has gone wrong. The Council's willingness to address and remedy fault when it is identified is welcomed and is indicative of a robust and open complaint culture.

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 have enclosed some information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings. If we can provide any further training for you please let Barbara Hedley, Assistant Ombudsman, know.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on 16 complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 31 days, six days more than last year. Most of the Council's departments respond within my 28 day response target but it seems that adult care services find it more difficult to respond within the timescale. I recognise that these cases can be complex and I am sure the Council will seek to improve its performance in the current year.

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 Barbara Hedley know and she 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
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June 2007

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

Complaints received by subject area	Adult care services	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	9	3	11	1	8	5	1	0	8	46
2005 / 2006	9	6	16	1	5	0	0	1	13	51
2004 / 2005	10	10	11	0	5	6	0	2	18	62

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	15	4	10	9	33	42
2005 / 2006	1	9	0	0	26	6	8	8	50	58
2004 / 2005	1	8	0	0	15	9	8	20	41	61

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	16	31.3
2005 / 2006	24	25.0
2004 / 2005	20	21.0

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