



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter

North Dorset 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

Volume

In the year ended 31 March 2007 my office received 16 complaints against your authority, seven more than in the previous year. Although nationally we received about the same number of complaints last year as the previous year, we expect to see some fluctuations in numbers from year to year, and I do not consider there is anything unusual about the rise in the number here.

Character

Most complaints, nine in number, were about Planning and Building Control, a similar pattern to the previous year. The remaining complaints included two about waste management, and five about Housing matters.

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.

I am pleased to report that, as in the previous two years, I did not need to issue any reports on investigations against your Council last year. One complaint was the subject of a local settlement, and I am grateful for your Council's willingness to resolve it promptly. It involved a failure by the Council to consider and investigate odour from a farm, which affected the complainant's home. Council officers met with the complainant and officers from the Environment Agency to discuss what could be achieved to mitigate the problem, and this resolved the complaint made to me without the need for me to recommend compensation.

Other findings

My office decided a total of 15 complaints against your Council last year, including four which were referred back to you to be put through the Council's own complaints procedure and to which I shall refer below. Of the remaining 11, four were about matters which I could not by law investigate, in three cases there was insufficient evidence of fault by the Council to warrant further investigation, and in three other cases there was no significant injustice to the complainants so the investigation was discontinued.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

My office referred four complaints back to your Council last year to be put through your own complaints procedure, because the law requires me to give a council a reasonable opportunity to deal with a complaint before I consider it. We call these premature complaints. Of the complaints we received last year, only two appear to have been treated previously as premature in this way. This is broadly in line with the national average.

Although we have not identified any specific failings in your Council's complaints procedure, and that is commendable, it is always good practice for a council to consider whether access to its complaints process is easy for all sections of the community, and we shall continue to gather information in this area. Although information appears on your website about how to make a complaint, it appears to be accessible from the homepage only via the 'contact us' link, from the A-Z of Council services or individual service pages, or by making a keyword search on 'complaint'. You may wish to consider whether more obvious and accessible links can or should be included on the homepage so that citizens do not have to follow a sequence of pages or have to log on, as is required if trying to access the complaint procedure from the A-Z page.

Ms Vereena Jones, my Assistant Ombudsman attended a meeting of your Standards Committee in November 2006 to give a presentation about my role. At the same meeting Members received and reviewed an internal report on complaints and compliments received by your Council during part of the year. It is clear to me from this that your Council views such matters positively and is willing to learn from its experiences of receiving and responding to complaints.

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. We offer generic courses in 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

My staff continue to tell me that the information and comments your Authority provides in response to their enquiries are clear and helpful. And your staff have continued to provide these responses in an average of just over 23 days, well within the target of 28 days we ask councils to try to achieve in the interests of providing a timely outcome for the complainant. I am particularly pleased that we receive responses from you on Housing complaints within an average of just under 19 days, since those complainants may be more vulnerable than others.

We continue to provide, here in Coventry on a more or less annual basis, a seminar for those Council officers responsible for liaison with my office. As you did not send a delegate to the last seminar in November 2006, you may wish to consider doing so when the next one is held. Participants tell us it is a very worthwhile exercise and allows them to learn more about the work of my office as well as

sharing good practice with other officers from a wider area. Please contact my office if this would be of interest to your Authority in the coming year.

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.

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.

Jerry White
Local Government Ombudsman
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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	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	5	2	9	16
2005 / 2006	0	2	7	9
2004 / 2005	0	1	21	22

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	1	0	0	3	3	4	4	11	15
2005 / 2006	0	4	0	0	5	2	1	1	12	13
2004 / 2005	0	2	0	0	4	2	6	4	14	18

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	7	23.7
2005 / 2006	4	23.3
2004 / 2005	13	22.7

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