



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

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

**North East Lincolnshire 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

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

In the twelve months ending 31 March 2007, I received 34 complaints about your Council. This was a reduction on the 47 I received in the previous year. These numbers are too small from which to draw meaningful conclusions but I thought it might be helpful to highlight changes in the profile of the types of complaints I received.

As you can see from this table, the number of complaints about many areas fell in 2006/07 compared to the previous year.

The two most significant rises were in relation to adult care services and public finance (administration of Council Tax). While I appreciate the numbers concerned are low in absolute terms, the Council may wish to reflect on them.

There are many reasons for complaint numbers to change over time, the Council may wish to consider what moves nearly a third of the complainants that come to me, to complain about the administration of Council Tax, and whether any trends or issues identified as part of its own complaint handling can provide insight into this.

Category of complaints	Received in 2006/07	Increase/decrease on 2005/06
adult care services	5	+4
benefits	0	-5
children & family services	1	-5
education	0	-4
housing	1	-6
other	4	-2
planning & building control	10	+2
public finance	11	+6
social services other	0	-1
transport & highways	2	same

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.

Decisions

In 2006/07 I took 33 decisions, a figure which differs from the number of complaints received because of work in hand at the start and finish of the year.

Of those 33 decisions: three were outside my jurisdiction, six I exercised discretion not to investigate, in nine I found no evidence of maladministration and 13 were 'premature' (in our view the Council had not been given adequate opportunity to investigate and resolve them for itself, so were returned to the Council to consider through its internal complaint procedure).

The remaining two were local settlements. I did not issue any reports against your council and overall did not find issues that gave significant concern.

In the two complaints where we agreed a local settlement, your Council was helpful in responding to our requests for information and in one case, suggested the settlement we then agreed on. It is always appreciated when a Council acknowledges shortcomings in its services and proactively seeks to put matters right, learning from its mistakes in the process.

Other findings

As you are aware, we ask for comprehensive responses to our enquiries within 28 days. Your Council responded on average in 38.2 days. As an average, this figure takes into account the extremes; responses that were received very quickly or which took a very long time. Taking into account those complaints, the Council's average response time is over 30 days.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I am aware from discussions between your liaison staff and my assistant ombudsman that your Council is committed to providing good customer service and the effective handling of complaints. This is reinforced by the recent investment you made in two of our training courses, delivered to your staff in March of this year.

The information your Council publishes about making complaints is clear and easily accessible via your web-site. I am pleased to see you make direct reference in your guidance to the LGO.

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. The feedback from councils that have taken up the training is very positive.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand. 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 and 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 different 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

Although responses from your Council take longer than I would ideally like, generally the liaison arrangements between my staff and your Council work well. The contact we have with your liaison officer is professional and always constructive. I am grateful for this as it enables both our organizations to deliver a more effective service.

I am also pleased that there is ongoing dialogue about complaints handling in general. I am keen to share and promote good practice, and providing advice on general complaint issues is an effective way of doing this.

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
Local Government Ombudsman
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June 2007

Encs: 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	5	0	1	0	1	4	10	11	0	2	34
2005 / 2006	1	5	6	4	7	8	8	5	1	2	47
2004 / 2005	6	2	3	1	3	19	8	4	1	2	49

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	2	0	0	9	6	3	13	20	33
2005 / 2006	2	7	0	0	16	8	3	11	36	47
2004 / 2005	0	6	0	0	13	6	6	13	31	44

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	12	38.2
2005 / 2006	19	29.8
2004 / 2005	18	49.8

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